

Mistrial in 1st Officer's Trial in Freddie Gray Case

JULIET LINDERMAN
DAVID DISHNEAU
Associated Press

BALTIMORE (AP) — The first effort to convict an officer in Freddie Gray's death from a broken neck in a Baltimore Police van ended Wednesday with a hung jury and a mistrial. Officials appealed for calm as small crowds protested along streets lined with police officers. The situation was quiet at the intersection where the worst rioting happened in April as parts of West Baltimore were set on fire. William Porter's mistrial is a setback for prosecutors



Officer William Porter, right, one of six Baltimore city police officers charged in connection to the death of Freddie Gray, arrives at a courthouse as jury deliberations continue in his trial, Wednesday, Dec. 16, 2015, in Baltimore Md. (AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana)



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trying to respond to a citizenry frustrated by violent crime and allegations of police misconduct. Homicides have soared and the pressure on city officials has been unrelenting since Baltimore City State's Attorney

Marilyn Mosby charged six officers in Gray's death. About 30 protesters chanting "send those killer cops to jail" outside the courthouse switched gears after the mistrial was announced, chanting "No

justice, no peace!" and "Black Lives Matter." The case hinged not on what Porter did, but what prosecutors said he didn't do. He was accused of failing to get medical help for a critically wounded Gray

and was charged with manslaughter, assault, misconduct in office and reckless endangerment, carrying maximum sentences totaling 25 years.

Continued on page 3



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Carter in Iraq to seek new ways to battle IS

LOLITA C. BALDOR

Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) — Defense Secretary Ash Carter said Wednesday he came away from meetings with Iraqi leaders with no agreement on the use of Apache attack helicopters or additional military advisers in the battle to retake the key city of Ramadi from Islamic State militants.

But he said the U.S. was ready to provide such sup-

port if the Iraqis asked. Speaking to reporters after meetings with Iraq Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and others, Carter said that as military conditions change, the U.S. is prepared to increase its contributions to the fight.



U. S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter addresses the U.S. troops at the Incirlik Air Base near Adana, Turkey, Tuesday, Dec. 15, 2015. Carter said the U.S. wants Turkey to better control its border with Syria, which could help block the flow of foreign fighters to the Islamic State group, and to more forcefully join the U.S.-led coalition "in the air and on the ground." (AP Photo)

port if the Iraqis asked. Speaking to reporters after meetings with Iraq Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and others, Carter said that as military conditions change, the U.S. is prepared to increase its contributions to the fight.

The Obama administration has been talking for days about "accelerating" the fight against IS, but that could be complicated by Iraq's reluctance to a greater U.S. presence in the country, including tools such as Apache helicopters and more troops.

"This is a very complex environment that we're operating in and we have to be attentive to some of the political realities that surround us every single day," said Lt. Gen. Sean MacFarland, top U.S. military commander for the Islamic State fight. "It's kind of hard to inflict support

on somebody. So we try to provide support."

The two countries at times differ on how to wage the war, and any military support "has to be consistent with the way Iraqi security forces fight," said MacFarland, speaking to reporters at the Baghdad International Airport.

Carter said MacFarland and Abadi believe there is no military need for the Apaches now. And those

assets should only be used when they can make a critical, strategic contribution to the fight. But, he said, that doesn't mean they won't make a difference "sometime in the future."

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The Iraqi reluctance for U.S. assistance also could delay any move to embed U.S. military advisers with Iraqi brigade headquarters.

The small advisory teams wouldn't be on the front lines, but would provide better planning advice and coordination for the Iraqi units, said Army Col. Steve Warren, a U.S. military spokesman who noted that many Iraqis "don't agree with the American presence in this country."

Carter also talked with MacFarland and the Iraqi leaders about the new U.S. plan to deploy a special commando force to Iraq. It will be designed to better capitalize on intelligence in order to target, capture and kill Islamic State leaders. Called an "expeditionary targeting force," the special operations troops would be used to increase the pressure on the insurgents. Details of the plan have not been disclosed, and U.S. officials haven't said when they may deploy to Iraq. □

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A senior U.S. official said the U.S. has been making preparations and will be ready at any moment to dispatch the Apaches when requested. The official was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly, so spoke on condition of anonymity. At the start of his meeting with Abadi, Carter offered a short statement on the importance of Iraq's independence "Everything we do ... here is subject to the approval of the sovereign Iraqi government," Carter said. "And I also wanted to emphasize to you, the respect for sovereignty and for Iraq's territorial sov-

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Report: US says Turkey must pull its unauthorized forces from Iraq

JOSH LEDERMAN

Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States ramped up pressure Wednesday on Turkey to pull unauthorized troops from Iraq, aiming to defuse a dispute that has rankled relations between two countries central to the fight against the Islamic State group.

Vice President Joe Biden, in a phone call with Iraq's leader, lent credence to Iraq's claim that its neighbor violated its sovereignty by sending reinforcements to a training camp in northern Iraq. He told Iraq's Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi that the deployment "occurred without the prior consent of the Iraqi government," the White House said.

Iraq's government has been incensed over Turkey's move to send reinforcements to the camp in the Bashiqa region, near the IS-held city of Mosul. Abadi has demanded that Turkish troops immediately withdraw from Iraq's territory. But Turkey has insisted the added troops were needed to protect its forces from attacks by IS — a concern that gained new relevance Wednesday when IS militants attacked the camp, killing three Iraqi Sunni fighters and wounding several Turkish trainers.

The flare-up between Iraq and Turkey has hardened into an unwelcome distraction for the U.S., which is working to persuade Turkey to step up its fight against IS while escalating its own military efforts against the extremist group. Biden and other U.S. officials have been working the phones for days, urging both Abadi and Turkey's Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu to resolve the dispute.

Iraq's Shiite-led government is under intense domestic pressure to resist the presence of foreign troops in the country, both from Sunni countries like Turkey and from the United States. Thousands of Shiite militiamen and supporters have joined rallies demanding Turkey's full withdrawal, chanting, "No to occupation." President Barack Obama's recent decision to dispatch about 50 U.S. special forces to Iraq met a lukewarm reaction in Baghdad, even though the U.S. insisted it coordinated all its military actions with Iraq's government.

The U.S. has been preparing to dispatch Apache attack helicopters and more military advisers to help Iraq wrest back the city of Ramadi from IS militants. But Abadi has resisted, arguing foreign forces aren't needed to fight IS in Iraq. Defense Secretary Ash Carter, who met with Abadi on Wednesday in Baghdad, emerged from the meetings to say there was no agreement about accepting more U.S. help.

Since Baghdad lodged its protest, Turkey has halted additional deployments and pulled out an unspecified number of the troops it had recently sent to bolster its ranks at the camp. Biden welcomed that initial withdrawal, but insisted it must continue. In a statement, the White House said Biden had called on Turkey to pull out "any military forces from Iraqi territory that have not been authorized by the Iraqi government."

Turkey has stationed trainers since last year at the camp in Bashiqa, where Kurdish and Sunni forces are being trained to fight IS.

Even while urging NATO ally Turkey to tread lightly in Iraq, the U.S. has been pressing Turkey to step up its involvement in the U.S.-led coalition fighting IS. A key U.S. priority is for Turkey to finally close a stretch of its border with Syria that IS controls on the Syrian side, denying the extremist group a crucial corridor for funneling foreign fighters into Syria. □

Mistrial in 1st Officer's Trial in Freddie Gray Case



A demonstrator is detained outside of the courthouse after a mistrial of Officer William Porter, one of six Baltimore city police officers charged in connection to the death of Freddie Gray, on Wednesday, Dec. 16, 2015, in Baltimore.

(AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana)

Gray was arrested while fleeing from officers and died April 19, a week after his neck was broken inside a police van as a seven-block trip to the station turned into a 45-minute journey around West Baltimore.

The young black man had been left handcuffed and shackled but without a seatbelt in the metal compartment.

The autopsy concluded that he probably couldn't brace himself whenever the van turned a corner or braked suddenly.

Porter is also black, as are two of the other five officers charged. Race was never mentioned during the trial. It wasn't clear how the mistrial would affect the other officers. Prosecutors had

planned to use Porter's testimony against two of them.

Prosecutors argued that Porter, who was present at five of the van's six stops, was criminally negligent for ignoring his department's policy requiring officers to seatbelt prisoners, and for not calling an ambulance even though Gray repeatedly said he needed medical help.

The defense said Porter went beyond the call of duty when he moved Gray to a seated position at one point, and told the van driver and a supervisor that Gray had said "yes" when asked if he needed to go to a hospital. The driver, Officer Caesar Goodson, is scheduled for trial on Jan. 6. □

Continued from Front

The judge planned to discuss a possible retrial with both sides in his chambers on Thursday.

Mayor Stephanie Rawlings Blake and the new police commissioner she installed after last April's riots warned people against more violence.

"We will not, we cannot be defined by the unrest of the spring," the mayor said. Attorney Billy Murphy, who obtained a \$6.4 million settlement for Gray's family from the city before Porter's trial, called the mistrial "a temporary bump on the road to justice."

The racially diverse jury of

seven men and five women deliberated for about 16 hours over three days. They indicated they were deadlocked on Tuesday, but Circuit Judge Barry Williams told them to keep at it, even as he denied their requests for help.

"It is clear you will not come to a unanimous agreement on any of the four charges," the judge said Wednesday. "You have clearly been diligent."

At least two activists were arrested.

Porter left the courthouse after conferring solemnly with defense attorney Joseph Murtha, and was shielded by deputies from the media. Murtha declined to comment.

US updates terror alert system

ALICIA A. CALDWELL
Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. updated its terror alert system on Wednesday, unveiling a new "bulletin" category intended to better inform the public about evolving terrorist threats. Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson said there remains no credible, specific terror threat to the United States but that the department nevertheless issued its first bulletin to keep the public informed in a "new phase of the global

threat environment." Wednesday's bulletin will be in effect until June 16, 2016 and outlines much of what Johnson and other federal have said in the days and weeks since the attacks in Paris and San Bernardino.

Johnson reiterated that while there's no specific threat, the government remains concerned about terrorist-inspired extremists, such as the attackers in California who killed 14 people before dying in a shootout with police. □

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For GOP candidates, a fight to define party's foreign policy



Donald Trump, second from left, makes a point as Ben Carson, left, Ted Cruz, second from right, and Jeb Bush look on during the CNN Republican presidential debate at the Venetian Hotel & Casino on Tuesday, Dec. 15, 2015, in Las Vegas.

(AP Photo/John Locher)

JULIE PACE

AP White House Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — For Republicans, this week's presidential debate highlighted a brewing fight to define the party's foreign policy posture, exposing divisions among candidates about the U.S. role in fostering regime change in the Middle East and tactics to prevent terror attacks at

home.

The fault lines reflect a party still in flux long after President George W. Bush's unpopular Iraq war damaged Republicans' standing on international issues. While there's little appetite among Republican candidates for the sweeping military intervention and nation-building Bush championed, most are wary of being pegged as isola-

tionists, particularly given Americans' heightened fears of terrorism following attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, California.

"The fundamental debate is, well,

if Bush did too much and Obama did too little, what's the right amount of international engagement?" said Richard Fontaine, a former foreign policy adviser to Sen. John McCain,

a Republican, and current president of the Center for New American Security think tank.

While foreign policy rarely decides presidential elections except in times of war, national security concerns are likely to remain a top issue for Americans at least through the early voting contests that begin in February.

As Republican leaders eye the general election, they believe voters disappointed with President Barack Obama's foreign policy stewardship will be reluctant to elect his former secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, the front-runner for the Democratic nomination.

First, though, Republicans must work out their own divisions, which could be viewed most clearly in Tuesday's debate through the prism of the rivalry between Florida Sen. Marco Rubio and Texas Sen. Ted Cruz.

One of the most striking contrasts between the senators centered on how aggressive the U.S. should be in seeking to topple Middle East dictators, some of whom have been bulwarks

against Islamic extremists. Cruz cast himself as a realist, arguing that while autocrats like Syrian President Bashar Assad don't share American values, their potential cooperation in fighting extremism is preferable to taking a chance on whoever might replace them.

"If we topple Assad, the result will be ISIS will take over Syria, and it will worsen U.S. national security interests," said Cruz, referring to the militant group that claimed responsibility for the attacks in Paris and appears to have inspired the California shooting. Cruz was backed by Republican front-runner Donald Trump and Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul, who both said the U.S. has higher priorities than ousting Assad.

Rubio's view was more in line with both the Bush and Obama administrations' calls for backing the spread of democracy in the Middle East. He argued that Assad's iron grip on power in Syria has allowed the Islamic State to thrive and said he "will not shed a tear" if he is pushed from power. □

Clinton says she wants to go beyond 'Buffett rule' on taxes



Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, accompanied by billionaire investor Warren Buffett and his daughter Susie, speaks at a Grassroots Organizing Event in Omaha, Neb., Wednesday, Dec. 16, 2015.

(AP Photo/Nati Harnik)

KEN THOMAS

Associated Press

OMAHA, Nebraska (AP)

— Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton

received a public endorsement Wednesday from Warren Buffett and said she wants to build on an Obama administration

push inspired by the billionaire investor to raise tax rates on the richest Americans. Introducing Clinton, Buffett offered a litany of

statistics describing a growing chasm between America's rich and poor, lamenting, "millions and millions and millions of Americans have been left behind." Buffett was the namesake for the push by the Obama administration to seek a tax rate of 30 percent on those earning \$1 million or more. "I want to go even further, because Warren is 100 percent right, as usual," Clinton said at a rally in Omaha, Nebraska. "I want to be the president for the struggling, the striving and the successful." The former secretary of state is the solid front-runner for the Democratic nomination, facing two rivals in the state-by-state primary contests that begin in February. On the Republican side, billionaire real estate mogul Donald Trump continues to lead a crowded field,

with Senators Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio looking to surge and former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush struggling to stay in the mix. Buffett said he would be "delighted" if Clinton takes the oath of office, asserting that she will not forget about middle-class Americans. The famed investor said he had watched all of the Republican presidential debates but Clinton was a better choice for voters. "You know, I used to love Abbott and Costello," he said. "Vaudeville was never this good," he added, suggesting the Republican debates have been comedy. Clinton was campaigning in deeply conservative Nebraska, which is holding its primary contest on March 5. Clinton says she wants Democrats to tell their Republican friends: "I don't have horns." □

Fed raises its key interest rate from record low near zero

MARTIN CRUTSINGER

AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve is raising interest rates from record lows set at the depths of the 2008 financial crisis, a shift that heralds modestly higher rates on some loans. The Fed coupled its first rate hike in nine years with a signal that further increases will likely be made slowly as the economy strengthens further and inflation rises from undesirably low levels. Wednesday's action signaled the central bank's belief that the economy has finally regained enough strength 6½ years after the Great Recession ended to withstand modestly higher borrowing rates.

"The Fed's decision today reflects our confidence in the U.S. economy," Chair Janet Yellen said at a news conference.

The Fed said in a statement after its latest meeting that it was lifting its key rate by a quarter-point to a range of 0.25 percent to 0.5 percent. Its move ends an extraordinary seven-year period of near-zero borrowing rates. But the Fed's statement suggested that rates would remain historically low well into the future, saying it expects "only gradual increases."

"The Fed reaffirmed that the pace of rate hikes would be slow," James Marple, senior economist at TD Economics wrote in a research note. "The Fed's expectations for rate hikes next year are set alongside a relatively cautious and entirely achievable economic outlook."

Stocks closed up sharply higher. The Dow Jones industrial average, which had been up modestly before the announcement, gained 224 points, or 1.3 percent, for the day.

The bond market didn't react much. The yield on the 10-year Treasury note rose slightly to 2.29 percent.

Rates on mortgages and car loans aren't expected to rise much soon. The Fed's benchmark rate doesn't directly affect them. Long-term mortgages, for example, tend to track 10-year

U.S. Treasury yields, which will likely stay low as long as inflation does and investors keep buying Treasuries.

But rates on some other loans, like credit cards and home equity credit lines, will likely rise, though probably only slightly as long as the Fed's rate hikes remain modest.

Shortly after the Fed's announcement, major banks began announcing that they were raising their prime lending rate from 3.25 percent to 3.50 percent. The prime rate is a benchmark for some types of consumer loans such as home equity loans. Wells Fargo was the first bank to announce the rate hike.

Among other things, the Fed's low-interest rate policies have helped jump-start auto sales, which are on track to reach a record 17.5 million this year. And the Fed's first hike may not slow them.

Steven Szakaly, chief economist for the National Automobile Dealers Association, says dealers will press financing companies to keep loan rates low. And competition for buyers will spur them to take other steps to hold down rates, such as accepting lower profits.

The rate squeeze will happen between the dealer and its finance company rather than the dealer and the consumers," Szakaly said. "Consumers won't even feel it." For months, Yellen and other Fed officials have said they expected any rate hikes to be small and gradual. But nervous investors have been looking for further assurances.

Yellen indicated that Wednesday's rate hike was partially defensive. If rates stayed at near zero, the Fed might not have the tools to combat a recession. "We've worried about the fact that with interest rates at zero, we have less scope to respond to negative shocks," she said at her news conference.

When growth struggles, the Fed often cuts rates to help increase the amount of cash flowing through



Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen arrives for a news conference in Washington, Wednesday, Dec. 16, 2015, to speak following an announcement that the Federal Reserve raised its key interest rate by quarter-point, heralding higher lending rates in an economy much sturdier than the one the Fed helped rescue in 2008.

(AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

the economy. But by staying close to zero, the Fed would be unable to cut rates or it would be forced to have negative rates for the first time in its history. □



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FBI: Calif. shooters privately discussed commitment to jihad

COLLEEN LONG
Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The husband-and-wife team who killed 14 people and wounded 21 others this month in San Bernardino, California, communicated privately about jihad and martyrdom before they were married, but there is no evidence to suggest the couple revealed those thoughts publicly on social media, the FBI director said Wednesday.

"We can see from our investigation that in late 2013, before there is a

physical meeting of these two people resulting in their engagement and then their journey to the United States, they're communicating online, showing signs in their communication of their joint commitment to jihad and to martyrdom," James Comey said after a New York conference involving the city's police department and private businesses.

Comey said those messages between Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik were direct, private messages.

"So far, in this investigation we have found no evidence of posting on social media by either of them at that period in time and thereafter reflecting their commitment to jihad or to martyrdom," he said.

Comey appeared to be referring to media reports suggesting that Malik had spoken openly on social media about jihad and that background checks had not detected those comments.

Comey also said the July 16 attack in two military sites Chattanooga, dur-

ing which five U.S. service members were killed, was "inspired and motivated by foreign terrorist propaganda."

The FBI had previously hesitated to use the word terrorism in relation to the attack. Comey said he understands Americans are jittery, but citizens should try to channel their awareness into vigilance, not panic. He said the threat from the Islamic State group has not changed — but it's vastly different from how terror cells operated around the time of the Sept. 11 attack.

"Your parents' al-Qaida is a very different model and was a very different threat that what we face today," he said.

The message is so much easier to receive now, he said. Islamic State operatives reach out via social media, and they want eager followers to join the fight at the Syria-Iraq border or kill where they are. And they use encrypted messaging programs that no one can access — not even the companies who make them. □

Christian college professor wearing headscarf put on leave



Wheaton College associate professor Larycia Hawkins, center, is greeted with applause from supporters as she begins her remarks during a news conference Wednesday, Dec. 16, 2015, in Chicago.

(AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast)

JASON KEYSER
CARLA JOHNSON

Associated Press
CHICAGO (AP) — A professor at a suburban Chicago Christian college who has been placed on administrative leave after donning a headscarf to demonstrate solidarity

with Muslims said Wednesday that her actions are demonstrations of her own faith.

Larycia Hawkins, who is a Christian and an associate professor of political science at Wheaton College, a private evangelical school west of Chicago,

was put on leave Tuesday. In recent days, she began wearing a hijab, the headscarf worn by some Muslim women, to counter what she called the "vitriolic" rhetoric against Muslims in recent weeks.

"In the spirit of Advent, my actions were motivated

by a desire to live out my faith. Period," Hawkins said Wednesday at a news conference at a Chicago church. Advent is the season leading up to Christmas.

With fears of terrorism simmering and Donald Trump calling for Muslims to be blocked from entering the United States, many American Muslims are on edge. Hawkins said she felt it was important to show solidarity with Muslims in the country. "Theoretical solidarity is not solidarity," the tenured faculty member said.

Supporters at the news conference included Wheaton students and Christian leaders who called for her reinstatement.

The college said in a statement Tuesday that it placed her on leave because of statements she made on social media about similarities between Islam and Christianity.

"In response to significant questions regarding the

theological implications of statements that Associate Professor of Political Science Dr. Larycia Hawkins has made about the relationship of Christianity to Islam, Wheaton College has placed her on administrative leave, pending the full review to which she is entitled as a tenured faculty member," the statement read.

A college spokeswoman did not return messages seeking more information about what precisely led to the decision.

In its written statement said the college had "no stated position" on the wearing of headscarves as a gesture of care and concern. But it also said that "overtures of Christian friendship must be enacted with theological clarity as well as compassion."

Hawkins also said "I affirm the creeds of the church," adding that she hopes for an amicable resolution with the college. □

Man gets 8 years in X-ray weapon plot that targeted Muslims

MICHAEL VIRTANEN
Associated Press

ALBANY, New York (AP) — An upstate New York man who admitted building a remote control for a mobile X-ray device intended to kill Muslims has been sentenced to eight years in prison.

Eric Feight, 57, pleaded guilty in 2014 to providing material support to terrorists. He was sentenced

Wednesday in federal court in Albany. Feight, a control systems engineer, told U.S. District Judge Gary Sharpe that co-defendant Glendon Scott Crawford first approached him to help create a mobile X-ray to sterilize medical waste, only later telling him it could be used to target Muslim terrorist cells operating in the U.S. "Potential targets were never discussed with

me," Feight said. The married father of three said he became afraid to drop out after Crawford introduced him to two seemingly dangerous investors in the project, actually FBI undercover agents.

He procrastinated for six months in delivering the remote control while refusing to integrate it to directly operate the actual X-ray machine the agents

brought, adding he didn't think it would work, he said. "You understood what it was you were doing," Sharpe said. The machine could have worked and killed people as intended, he said. "It's bizarre somebody with your background, your intelligence and your experience would be listening to Crawford's nonsense," Sharpe said.

Feight's sentence was

shorter than the 15 years prosecutors requested.

Crawford, 51, an industrial mechanic at General Electric in Schenectady, where Feight was a subcontractor, was convicted of attempting to produce a deadly radiological device, conspiring to use a weapon of mass destruction and distributing information about weapons of mass destruction. □

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US Financial Front:

November home construction recovers after October slide

JOSH BOAK
AP Economics Writer
WASHINGTON (AP) — A big jump in apartment construction in the Midwest and South boosted the pace of homebuilding in November, marking a solid bounce back after tumbling in October. Construction of single-family houses also increased and reached an eight-year high.

The Commerce Department said Wednesday that total housing starts — both houses and apartments — climbed 10.5 last month to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 1.17 million homes. The increase reversed much of drop in starts during October. There has been a sharp growth in homebuilding, with starts having increased 11 percent so far this year. Solid hiring over the past two years and relatively low interest rates have buoyed the real estate market, encouraging more people to upgrade to two new houses and sign rental leases.

Single-family house construction rose 7.6 percent last month to 768,000, the best reading since January 2008. The building of multi-family complexes, primarily apartments, advanced 18.1 percent.

The gains appear likely to continue over the next few months. Building permits rose 11 percent in November to an annual rate of 1.29 million, with almost all of the increase coming from apartments. The additional permits suggest new-found momentum in construction after a choppy few months where growth appeared to be stalling. "An upward trend in total housing construction ap-

pears to be re-emerging, following the slowdown in the summer," said Ian Shepherdson, chief economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics.

Still, construction is recovering from the depths of the Great Recession as starts remain short of the 1.5 million rate that housing sector analysts associate with a healthy market.

Michelle Meyer, an economist at Bank of America Merrill Lynch, estimates that housing starts will average 1.28 million in 2016 and 1.4 million in 2017. Fueling the gains will be millennials graduating college and leaving their parents' homes for rentals, while a share of owners upgrade to new houses.

New construction has increasingly focused on higher-end buyers and renters, doing little to alleviate the price pressures faced by many Americans. The median rent on a newly built apartment was \$1,372 a month in 2014, about \$500 more a month than what about half of renters could afford without being financially burdened, according to a recent analysis by Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies.

New homes sold for a median price of \$281,500 in October, according to the Commerce Department. That represents a \$61,900 premium on the median sales price for an existing home, according to the National Association of Realtors.

Builders are confident that demand from buyers will remain robust, although the view of the market has dimmed over the past three months. The National Association of Home Builders/Wells Fargo



A worker helps to frame a new home at a housing tract in Las Vegas. A big jump in apartment construction in the Midwest and South boosted the pace of homebuilding in November, marking a solid bounce back after tumbling in October. (AP Photo/John Locher)

builder sentiment index released Tuesday slipped in December to 61, the second straight monthly decline. Readings above 50 indicate more builders view sales conditions as good, rather than poor. The index has been consistently above 50 since July last year, although it has been below that critical threshold in the Northeast for much of 2015. □

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Russian airstrikes restore Syrian military balance of power

ZEINA KARAM

Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Weeks of Russian airstrikes in Syria appear to have restored enough momentum to the government side to convince President Bashar Assad's foes and the world community that even if he doesn't win the war he cannot quickly be removed by force.

That realization, combined with the growing sense that the world's No. 1 priority is the destruction of the Islamic State group, has led many to acknowledge that however unpalatable his conduct of the war, Assad will have to be tolerated for at least some time further.

The most dramatic sign of that came Tuesday with the statement by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry that Assad's future will be determined by the Syrian people, suggesting in the clearest way yet that he can stay on for now and be part of a transition.

That statement — less a reversal than the culmination of a rethink that had been underway for months — was doubly piquant coming in Moscow, where Kerry was discussing the Syria question with Russian officials.

"The Russians with their military intervention have basically said you can refuse

to talk to Bashar Assad, but that means that you won't get a political solution," said Yezid Sayigh, a senior associate at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut. "If you do want that, then you have to deal with this man." Still, significant gaps remain between the U.S. and Russia on Assad's future, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power said Wednesday, emphasizing that the U.S. position on Assad has not changed. "There is going to have to be a political transition, and Assad will have to go," Power told reporters ahead of a major international conference on Syria in New York on Friday.

Russia, a key backer of Assad, began a campaign of airstrikes in Syria on Sept. 30 at a critical juncture in the civil war, when Assad's forces were fast losing ground to the rebels around areas considered key to the government's survival.

While Moscow says its airstrikes target the Islamic State group and other "terrorists" in Syria, much of the Russian air campaign has focused on more moderate forces fighting Assad in the country's central and northern region where IS has little or no presence.

The results have been slow

in coming. Despite nearly 11 weeks of crushing Russian airstrikes, government

slow or halt rebel advances on several fronts — and he has captured dozens of vil-

a sprawling military air base near Damascus that had been held by rebels for the



In this photo released by the Syrian official news agency SANA, shows Syrian President Bashar Assad, speaks during an interview with the Spanish news agency EFE, in Damascus, Syria. Assad said in the interview that Saudi Arabia, the United States and some Western countries want "terrorist groups" to join peace negotiations to try end Syria's civil war. The Syrian government refers to all insurgent groups as terrorists. (SANA via AP)

troops aided by Lebanese Hezbollah and Iranian allied forces have failed to reverse losses in the northern province of Idlib and in Palmyra, the ancient desert town in central Syria that fell to the Islamic State group over the summer.

The Russian airstrikes, however, have helped Assad

lages in northern and western Syria.

The government's biggest victory so far was last month's lifting of a three-year siege on the military air base of Kweiras by extremist groups in the northern province of Aleppo.

That was followed Monday by Syrian troops' capture of

past three years, bolstering the government's presence in an area overwhelmingly controlled by opposition forces. And on Wednesday, government forces captured a strategic mountain in the northwest, inching closer to a rebel-held stronghold in the coastal province of Latakia. □

Ongoing fighting in Yemen undermines cease-fire, peace talks

AHMED AL-HAJ

Associated Press

SANAA, Yemen (AP) — Clashes were underway Wednesday along several front lines in Yemen, claiming at least 42 lives and undermining a day-old cease-fire and peace talks between the internationally recognized government and Shiite rebels taking place in Switzerland.

The U.N.-brokered talks that began Tuesday were meant to give Yemen's warring factions a chance to find a solution to the conflict that has engulfed the Arab world's poorest country.

At the same time, an agreed-on cease-fire went into effect on the ground,

meant to last a week. But as fighters on both sides ignored the truce, expectations for the negotiations were low.

In the capital, Sanaa, a high-profile official from the rebels, also known as Houthis, warned on Wednesday that it will not be possible to continue the talks unless the cease-fire holds. According to security officials, fighting was underway for a second day Wednesday in the provinces of Ibb, Bayda, Marib, Jawf, and Taiz. In the besieged city of Taiz, shelling by Houthis killed six civilians, said the officials who are neutral in the conflict. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they

were not authorized to talk to reporters.

The officials also said the 42 were killed since the cease-fire started, adding that field commanders and fighters from both sides had been ignoring cease-fire orders, a worrying sign that political leadership was losing control of fighters on the ground.

Yemen's conflict pits the rebels and army units loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh against forces of the internationally recognized government, allied with southern separatists, religious extremists and other militants. The government is backed by a Saudi-led coalition.

Later in the day, other in-

dependent officials who also spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the media, said that negotiations were underway over the release of some 500 prisoners from both sides. The chances of such a deal occurring were not immediately clear.

According to U.N. figures, the war in Yemen has killed at least 5,884 people since March, when the fighting escalated after the Saudi-led coalition began launching airstrikes targeting the rebels.

Previous efforts to end the violence have ended in failure, as the government insisted the Houthis comply with a U.N. resolution

that requires them to hand over weapons and withdraw from territory they captured over the past year, including the capital, Sanaa. The Houthis have demanded the country's political future be decided through negotiations.

In the past, the rebels have said they are willing to honor the U.N. resolution but did not specify to whom they would hand over weapons and territory. Yemen's civil war has also divided the armed forces, which have units loyal to ousted president Saleh, a Houthi ally, and others who answer to the internationally recognized government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. □

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French minister puts police on far-right leader's IS tweets

PARIS (AP) — France's interior minister asked judicial police on Wednesday to look into tweets by far-right leader Marine Le Pen of gruesome photos of executions by the Islamic State group — her response to a broadcast journalist broadly comparing her party to the orga-

nization. Le Pen tweeted the photos after Jean-Jacques Bourdin, known for his brash style, said on BFM TV that her National Front party and IS both focus on identity, so share a "community of spirit." "Daesh is THIS!" Le Pen said in angry tweets showing

executions, using the Arabic acronym for the group. But her effort to make a distinction between her anti-immigration party and the Islamic State group appears to have backfired. The incident comes three days after Le Pen's National Front suffered a stinging defeat in critical regional

elections on Sunday, failing to take any regions, a personal humiliation for Le Pen who ran in the north. However, she came out victorious in a legal battle Tuesday when a Lyon court acquitted her of inciting hatred for denouncing prayers in the streets by Muslims.

Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve, asked about the tweets in parliament, told lawmakers he has taken the case to a section of the judicial police that deals with illicit content on the Internet so it can look into the matter "as it does each time these photos are diffused." □

Spanish PM punched hard in head at campaign appearance

ALAN CLENDENNING
Associated Press

MADRID (AP) — A young man punched Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy hard in the head Wednesday evening after managing to get next to him at a campaign appearance in the northern city where Rajoy grew up. The unidentified attacker was standing next to Rajoy on a street in the city of Pontevedra in the Galicia region while he talked to a crowd, then pulled his arm back and delivered a punishing left hook to Rajoy's left check.

Video on Spanish TV showed Rajoy falling toward the ground from the impact but being propped up by others around him. Spanish media reported that Rajoy's attacker was

17. Video showed him being detained by security guards and then taken in handcuffs from a building, raising his hands and thumbs into the air in an apparent victory sign. Rajoy's face was bruised in photos of him after the attack but he did not appear to be seriously injured, though Spanish media said his glasses were knocked to the ground and crushed. Rajoy later appeared, smiling but without his glasses, at a campaign appearance in the nearby city of A Coruna. Development Minister Ana Pastor confirmed the assault in a tweet, telling Rajoy she had no words "to express my indignation for the aggression you suffered on the streets of Pontevedra."



Spain's Prime Minister and right wing Popular Party candidate Mariano Rajoy, center left, kisses a woman during a campaign rally at Las Rozas bullring, near Madrid, Spain. The Spanish general elections will be held on Sunday, Dec. 20. (AP Photo/Daniel Ochoa de Olza)

Polls say the Popular Party will win in Sunday's general election but won't regain the majority it has in par-

liament following years of unpopular austerity cuts hitting cherished national health care and public ed-

ucation plus tax hikes Rajoy promised he would not impose before his party's landslide 2011 victory. □

Iraqi official: Gunmen abduct up to 26 Qatari hunters

QASSIM ZAHRA
Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) — In a remote desert area in southern Iraq, unidentified gunmen driving in SUVs raided a camp for falconry hunters on Wednesday, abducting up to 26 Qataris, Iraqi officials said. The gunmen raided the camp located in the desert in Samawah province at dawn, snatching between 19 and 26 Qataris, Ahmed Manfi, a member of the provincial

council, told The Associated Press. Two Iraqi intelligence officers were also abducted but were later released, Manfi added. Iraq's Interior Ministry said the aim of the abduction was "to achieve political and media goals." A ministry statement said police were carrying out search operations in the area. Qatar's Foreign Ministry said in a statement Wednesday evening that it has contacted "Iraqi gov-

ernment and concerned entities at the highest security and political levels" to ascertain details of what happened and to try to secure the hunters' release. The Qatari statement said the hunters entered Iraq on an official permit from the Iraqi Interior Ministry and in coordination with the Iraqi Embassy in Doha. It did not specify how many were abducted or provide details on their identities. Qatari Foreign Minister

Khalid bin Mohammed al-Attiyah spoke with his Iraqi counterpart by phone about the matter, according to another statement carried on the Gulf country's state news agency. Samawah is located on the Euphrates River, about 370 kilometers (230 miles) southeast of the Iraqi capital, Baghdad. Hunters from Gulf states, mainly Qatar, often visit Iraq's vast western and southern desert areas for hunting and

purchasing falcons. Iraqi authorities approve the expeditions and provide protective forces that accompany the hunters. Qatar is seen by Iraqis as a main supporter of Sunni militant groups, mainly the Islamic State group, which has captured large swaths of land in Iraq and neighboring Syria. Qatar denies supporting extremist groups, including IS, and is part of the U.S.-led coalition battling the group. □

Calls for investigation after “massacre” in Nigeria



Muslims students carry placards and shout slogans against the Nigerian government against the killings of hundreds of Shiite Muslims and detaining their leader Ibraheem Zakzaky in Jammu, India, Tuesday, Dec. 15, 2015. Nigerian Soldiers killed hundreds of Shiite Muslims this weekend after their group opened fire on the convoy of Nigeria’s army chief, the Shia Islamic Movement and military reports said Monday. (AP Photo/Channi Anand)

MICHELLE FAUL
Associated Press
LAGOS, Nigeria (AP) — Human rights advocates and the United States called for an investigation following the Nigerian army’s raid on

a Shiite sect in which hundreds of people were reportedly killed. Details of the weekend violence in Zaria have been slow to emerge, with the three attacked areas of the northern town on

lockdown as late as Tuesday, with no one allowed to enter or leave. “The United States calls on the Government of Nigeria to quickly, credibly, and transparently investigate these events in

Zaria and hold to account any individuals found to have committed crimes,” the U.S. Embassy said in a statement Wednesday. “It is essential that all sides refrain from actions that further destabilize the situation,” U.S. Ambassador James Entwhistle added. He said he expects that a visit to Zaria on Tuesday by Nigeria’s interior minister is a first step in a “timely, transparent investigation.” The bloodshed was yet another blow to Africa’s most populous nation, already beset by a 6-year-old insurgency waged by Boko Haram, a violent Islamic group which is at odds with the Shiites and others who oppose its extremist views. Amnesty International said in a statement late Tuesday that the shooting of members of the Shiite group in Zaria “must be urgently investigated ... and anyone found responsible for

unlawful killings must be brought to justice.” “Whilst the final death toll is unclear, there is no doubt of that there has been a substantial loss of life at the hands of the military,” said M.K. Ibrahim, director of Amnesty International, Nigeria. Spokesman Ibrahim Musa of the Shiite Islamic Movement in Nigeria said soldiers on Monday carried away about 200 bodies from around the home of the head of the sect, Ibraheem Zakzaky — who was himself badly wounded and whose whereabouts have not been disclosed by the authorities — and hundreds more corpses were in the mortuary. Human rights activists said hundreds of people, perhaps as many as 1,000, were killed. The military has said Zakzaky is in its “safe custody.” The army said troops attacked sites in Zaria after 500 Shiites blocked the convoy of Nigeria’s army chief, and tried to kill him on Saturday. A report from the military police said some Shiites were crawling through tall grass toward Gen. Tukur Buratai’s vehicle “with the intent to attack the vehicle with (a) petrol bomb” while others “suddenly resorted to firing gunshots from the direction of the mosque.” In a statement Monday, the army said there was “loss of lives as a result of the Shiite group members blocking roads and not allowing other passers-by to go about their lawful businesses and activities,” and added that “as soon as order is restored ... the police will conduct an enquiry and the public will be informed.”

UN chief warns Burundi is on the brink of civil war

EDITH M. LEDERER
Associated Press
UNITED NATIONS (AP) — Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon warned Wednesday that Burundi is on the brink of a civil war that could engulf the region. Burundi has been in turmoil since the April announcement that President Pierre Nkurunziza would seek a third term in office, which he won in a disputed election in July. More than 300 people have been killed, about 215,000 others have fled Burundi since April, and violence has escalated. The U.N. chief expressed

alarm at the “chilling” escalation in violence between government forces and armed fighters. At least 87 people, including eight security men, died Friday when an unidentified group of more than 150 people attacked three military facilities. Rights groups say this was the worst violence since the crisis over presidential term limits began with street protests that boiled over into the attempted military coup in May. Ban told a news conference his special adviser, Jamal Benomar, will travel

to the region before the end of the week to press the African Union, regional groups, neighboring countries and Burundi’s government to urgently start a political dialogue involving all parties. “We must do all we can to prevent mass violence and act decisively should it erupt,” he said. Ban said the U.N. may have to ramp up its presence and activities depending on the situation. He recommended that Benomar’s mission be beefed up, which is already happening. He also outlined two other options to the U.N.

Security Council — a political mission and a peacekeeping force. U.S. Ambassador Samantha Power called the situation in Burundi “horrific” and stressed that there is currently no dialogue among the parties on the ground. She warned of the risk that the conflict will become “more of an ethnic conflict than a political one.” Power said Ban will discuss the crisis with the Security Council later Tuesday. Many council members are eager to see the U.N. speed up its contingency planning, she said.

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Currency changes put Argentine economy on new path

PETER PRENGAMAN

Associated Press

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina

(AP) — Argentina lifted deeply unpopular restrictions on buying U.S. dollars Wednesday, aiming to put an end to a byzantine monetary system that made it difficult for businesses to operate and spawned a booming black market.

The move, a campaign promise of new President Mauricio Marci, was outlined by Finance Minister Alfonso Prat-Gay. The decision, combined with the lifting of export taxes on many agricultural products announced earlier this week, will expose Latin America's third-largest economy to international market forces in ways not seen for a dozen years.

"This system choked the economy for the last four years," Prat-Gay said at a news conference that was broadcast live Wednesday night. "We are now returning to normal."

Attempting to shore up dwindling foreign currency reserves, the preceding administration of President Cristina Fernandez instituted restrictions on buying foreign currency in 2011. It was one of many protectionist policies instituted during 12 years of governments led by Fernandez and her late husband and predecessor as president, Nestor Kirchner.

Argentines who wanted to buy dollars, a common practice in a South American country with a long history of financial meltdowns, had to meet several requirements. And most were limited to a few hundred dollars a month — when U.S. currency was



Argentina's Finance Minister Alfonso Prat-Gay announces plans to lift restrictions on buying U.S. dollars in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Wednesday, Dec. 16, 2015. The Argentine government has announced plans to lift deeply unpopular restrictions on buying U.S. dollars that have created a booming black market in the South American nation. (AP Photo/Victor R. Caivano)

available in banks.

The limits, locally called a "cepo," or "clamp," led to dual exchange rates.

Over the last year, while the official exchange rate was fixed around 9 Argentine pesos to the dollar, on

the black market a dollar fetched as much as 16 pesos.

Businesses, especially

those needing to deal in dollars, were deeply affected. While the Fernandez administration insisted that dollars coming into the country trade at the official rate, getting dollars out at that rate, if at all, proved difficult.

"The 'clamp' killed the supply of dollars. It didn't stop the demand," said Prat-Gay.

While the change will be celebrated by international investors and welcomed by many Argentines, there is also much fear about a sharp devaluation of the peso, and what that might do to already soaring prices.

Annual inflation this year is estimated at around 30 percent. Between the time Macri was elected on Nov. 22 and his inauguration last week, many businesses jacked up prices in hopes of protecting themselves against any devaluation. □

Chile: Bachelet approval rebounds from record low

SANTIAGO, Chile (AP) —

The approval rating of Chilean President Michelle Bachelet is rebounding after plunging to its worst level since she took office in March 2014, the South American country's most influential pollster said Wednesday.

The latest survey by pollster CEP said Bachelet's overall approval rose 2 percentage points to 24 percent in November from the previous survey in August.

Bachelet was once one of the world's most popular politicians and ended her 2006-10 administration with an approval rate of 84 percent. But in her second



Chile's President Michelle Bachelet waves in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Chile's most influential pollster says the approval rating of Bachelet is rebounding after plunging to its worst level since she took office in March 2014. (AP Photo/Victor R. Caivano)

presidency, her popularity has been dented by an influence-peddling scandal

involving her family. In the poll, 64 percent of respondents said they

don't trust Bachelet, while 66 percent said she lacks the leadership to confront crisis situations.

Since taking office for a second time, Bachelet has also had to deal with a drought in the south, floods in the northern desert, an earthquake and two volcanic eruptions. Her government also has struggled to fulfill promises for ambitious reforms amid slowing economic growth and record-low prices and waning global demand for copper, Chile's top export. The poll surveyed 1,449 people between Nov. 4 and Dec. 6. It has an error margin of 3 percentage points. □

El Salvador concerned over spike in child migration to US

MARCOS ALEMAN

Associated Press

SAN SALVADOR, El Salvador (AP) — El Salvador's foreign minister expressed concern Wednesday over a recent spike in the number of unaccompanied minors crossing into the U.S. through Mexico.

Hugo Martinez warned that if the root causes of migration don't change, there could be a repeat of the

2014 crisis when tens of thousands of children and families streamed over the border.

"Here we have a warning sign that if we do not do anything to change the structural causes of that migration, no matter what we do we will always be at risk of that happening again," Martinez said.

Many Central American migrants who try to reach

the United States say they are fleeing rampant violence, widespread poverty and lack of economic opportunity.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection says 10,588 unaccompanied minors crossed in October and November, up from 5,129 during the same two months of 2014.

However, Martinez noted that during the October-

September 2015 fiscal year, the numbers were still down about 50 percent from the previous 12-month period.

"It's something we always told the United States: 'Look, sirs,

we will do everything possible to reduce this flow,' and we did reduce it. ... But no measure will be sustainable over time if we do not push a medium- and long-term strategy," Martinez

said in an interview on national television.

An initiative known as the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle, which covers El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, aims to reduce Central American migration to the United States by fostering economic growth, improving public safety and bolstering institutions and human capital in those nations. □

US, Cuba reach understanding on restoring commercial flights



A Continental Airlines flight from Miami arrives at the Jose Marti Airport of Havana, Cuba. The United States and Cuba have reached an understanding on restoring regularly scheduled commercial flights, Cuban and American officials said Wednesday, Dec. 16, 2016 on the eve of the anniversary of detente between the Cold War foes.

(AP Photo/Jose Goitia)

M. WEISSENSTEIN

Associated Press

HAVANA (AP) — The United States and Cuba have

reached an understanding on restoring regularly scheduled commercial flights, Cuban and Ameri-

can officials said Wednesday on the eve of the anniversary of detente between the Cold War foes.

The diplomatic advance helps open the way for U.S. airlines to begin flying to Cuba within months in what would be the biggest business deal struck as the two countries try to normalize relations.

Officials on both sides described it as an understanding on aviation but not yet a formal agreement and they hoped to reach a formal deal within hours or days.

The three officials spoken to weren't authorized to talk publicly and demanded anonymity.

Right now, American and Cuban travelers must fly on charter flights that are complicated to book, rarely involve an online portal and often force prospective travelers to email documents and payment information back and forth with an agent.

Those flying sometimes must arrive at the airport

four hours in advance and strict baggage limits apply. U.S. officials and aviation executives have speculated that Cuba could allow more than a dozen flights from the U.S. a day. It's unclear if those flights would completely replace charters, but they appear certain to create a surge in travel that would place heavy strain on Cuba's already overstrained tourist infrastructure.

Hotels and private hostals are booked for months.

Authorized American travel to the island is up 50 percent this year, Jeffrey DeLaurentis, who heads the U.S. Embassy in Havana, said Tuesday. While the majority of U.S. travelers are Cuban-Americans, there has been a sharp rise in Americans traveling for specially authorized purposes, particularly on educational tours known as people-to-people travel. □

Venezuelan socialists seek to undermine opposition congress

FABIOLA SANCHEZ

Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP)

— Venezuelan socialists took another step to undermine the opposition's landslide in congressional elections, creating a new grassroots assembly that critics fear could become a vehicle to override the incoming opposition-led legislature.

On Tuesday, National Assembly President Diosdado Cabello presided over the inauguration inside the legislature building of the first-ever "National Communal Parliament" with the aim of

giving revolutionary activists a mechanism to make decisions and manage resources.

Cabello didn't offer details on how the grassroots assembly, an outgrowth of the late Hugo Chavez's dream of empowering self-administering communal councils, will operate.

But opponents fear it could be an attempt to wrest control from the incoming opposition-controlled congress much as other central government-created agencies have been entrusted with large budgets operating parallel to de-

funded districts where opposition politicians govern. President Nicolas Maduro has been defiant in the face of the opposition's winning a two-third supermajority in Dec. 6 elections, vowing to take to the streets to defend the revolution started by Chavez and blaming the loss on an "economic war" waged with U.S. support.

He also shot down several top priorities for the incoming congress, including an amnesty law for jailed activists the opposition considers political prisoners. On Tuesday, in a meeting

with grassroots activists, he praised the new legislative initiative with heated rhetoric.

"I'm going to give all the power to the communal parliament," Maduro said. "This parliament is going to be a legislative mechanism from the grassroots. All power to the Communal parliament," he said, without giving details.

In another slap to the opposition, lawmakers also swore in Tuesday as the nation's top public defender the judge, Susana Barreiros, who this year sentenced opposition leader Leopoldo

do Lopez to nearly 14 years in jail.

Cabello is vowing to ram through in the coming days the appointment of 12 Supreme Court justices to fill vacancies left by pro-government judges who retired early rather than risk seeing the high court tilt toward the opposition.

The opposition's sweeping win gives it the power to challenge Maduro's rule by removing ministers, passing laws without the executive's support and even convoking an assembly to rewrite Chavez's 1999 constitution. □



December 31st: The 'Hottest' Party in Aruba featuring NBO: 'Shine On New Year's Party' by Renaissance Convention Center!



trance to the celebration is \$180 for adults and \$45 for kids between 5 and 12 years. It includes an extensive buffet that features a salad bar, sushi display and bread station that offers; pain rustique, baguette, focaccia and kaiser roll. Meat lovers can enjoy the carving board that offers; roasted whole steamship round beef and smoked roast pork rack. Besides this there is also an action station that offers; tuna, red snapper and mahi mahi just to name a few. When finished, visit the dessert delights station that offers the most delicious desserts like; white chocolate fondue, tropical fruit flambee, sweet potato pecan pie, zesty lemon tart, champagne sherbet and more. All guests will enjoy a super premium bar and entertainment by NBO.

ORANJESTAD- December – It's almost year end and Renaissance Convention Center (RCC) is ready to rock the New Year. Thursday, Decem-

ber 31st RCC will have its traditional 'Shine ON NYE Party'. The party starts at 8PM. Last year's party can be summed-up in a few words, glitter, glamour and 'ambiente'~ which is the Papiamentu word for festive ambience. It's the 'hottest' party each year;

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World Famous R&B Songstress Meli'sa Morgan Visits Aruba!



PALM BEACH - Aruba had the honor recently to once again host famous R&B, Soul, Jazz and House Music singer Meli'sa Morgan of the United States. She has had #1 Billboard songs on The Dance Charts & R&B Charts, and has been nominated for several awards throughout her fabulous career! She also travels and performs all over the world, most recently returning from London, where she played The Wembley Arena in the same show with Patti Labelle.



She has a new song out titled "So Good," which is available on iTunes and Amazon.com. The house/dance/soul track is receiving great reviews. While on Aruba she was able to visit the team at 106.7 FM Warehousemusic Radio station (ilovearubafm.com), and enjoyed a fun interview during the segment 'Breakfast Club' with DJ Oscar Booy.



"I was delighted to visit Aruba's new and exciting dance radio station to promote my new song," she tells us. "The interview was great and they played my new song and are adding it to their playlist as well as playing my songs on the station that have already become hits!"

Morgan is a happy vacation club owner at the Paradise Beach Villas, and she was recently honored by the Aruba Tourism Authority as a Distinguish Visitor for returning to the island for 12 consecutive years!

The food here is Delish!"

"I Love Aruba... It is my favorite vacation place in the world," she says. "That is why I come back every year to enjoy the beautiful Eagle Beach, shop and enjoy the wonderful people and the culture, as well as all the great restaurants..."

"I am looking forward to coming back in August to perform at 106.7 FM LoveFest Concert, as well as doing other shows here in Aruba in the near future. They welcome my music and me with open arms," she concludes. We look forward to seeing you again and again, here on Aruba! ☐



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The honorees were Mr. Fred and Mrs. Debbie Gravetter of New York.

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from-home.' The certificates were presented by Ms. Marouska Heyliger representing the Aruba Tourism Authority together with family and friends from the Divi Tamarijn Resort. □

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PALM BEACH - Start off your weekend the best way possible and go to The Sopranos Piano Bar for its 'Bada Bing' Happy Hour. The place is offering Premium Bar 2-for-1 from 5 - 8pm and to give you a good taste of what the piano man can do, he starts playing his songs at 7:45pm. "All Prices Get Whacked", says the poster about Friday's special Happy Hour. Expect to make new friends, and enjoy terrific snacks and music at The Sopranos, which is located in the Arawak Garden across from the Occidental Resort on the Hi-Rise strip.



For more info, surf to www.sopranospianobararuba.com. Start the weekend on Fridays, 'Bada Bing' at The Sopranos Piano Bar, guys! ☐



UFC Lightweights Warn McGregor: You're Going To Get Hurt

Page 18



Under Review

Buffalo Bills head coach Rex Ryan, right, disputes a call with line judge Bart Longson (2) during the first half of an NFL football game against the Houston Texans, Sunday, Dec. 6, 2015, in Orchard Park, N.Y.

(AP Photo/Gary Wiepert)

NFL Changing Playoff Officiating Procedure

BARRY WILNER

NEW YORK (AP) -- The NFL will have game referees in the playoffs consult with its director of officiating about the application of rules in situations not currently covered in instant replay reviews.

Those situations will include the appropriate assessment of penalty yardage; proper administration of the game clock; correct downs; and any other administrative matter not currently reviewable.

But Dean Blandino, the vice president of officiating, will not be able to call a foul or change a call, "or otherwise become involved in on-field judgment calls that are not subject to the current instant replay system." Communication on administration matters can be initiated by Blandino or the referee, the league said Wednesday.

The changes were recommended by the NFL's powerful competition committee and approved

by Commissioner Roger Goodell. Earlier this month, Goodell had spoken to the 32 team owners about the concept.

"The committee feels strongly that giving the referee and Dean the ability to consult with each other in certain situations beyond instant replay will further support officiating in the playoffs," said competition committee chairman Rich McKay, president of the Atlanta Falcons.

"The officials do a very dif-

ficult job exceedingly well, and we think this adjustment in the playoffs will make them even better."

The NFL has had a rough season with its officiating, including notifying teams several times that calls had been missed or incorrectly made.

Officials, who are part-timers, have also been doubted by team personnel, players and the media about their mastery of the encyclopedic rule book. It is likely the league will

look further during the off-season into how officiating is managed during games, with the competition committee playing a major role. "We constantly strive to make our game progressively better for the players, coaches and fans," said NFL Executive Vice President of Football Operations Troy Vincent.

"This change will assist our officials with an additional resource for clarity and consistency in game administration." □

UFC lightweights warn McGregor: You're going to get hurt

GREG BEACHAM
AP Sports Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — UFC featherweight champion Conor McGregor has vowed to move up in weight soon to fight for the lightweight title.

The two men he could face for that belt are both warning him to pick on somebody his own size.

UFC lightweight champion Rafael Dos Anjos faces Donald "Cowboy" Cerrone on Saturday night in a title fight in Orlando. UFC President Dana White says the winner's next bout will be against McGregor if the popular Irish champion decides to move up from 145 to 155 pounds.

Dos Anjos and Cerrone dislike each other, but they agree McGregor's fists wouldn't pack quite so much punch in the larger weight class. "He gets a lot of hype, and he's a good fighter," Dos Anjos said.

McGregor ended featherweight champion Jose



Conor McGregor poses on the scale during the weigh-in for UFC 194, Friday, Dec. 11, 2015, in Las Vegas. McGregor has vowed to move up in weight soon to fight for the lightweight title.

(AP Photo/John Locher)

Aldo's 10-year, 18-fight winning streak last Saturday with a stunning knockout just 13 seconds into their title fight at UFC 194 in Las Vegas. Afterward, McGregor repeated his inten-

tion to become a simultaneous two-belt champion, although he isn't sure when he will try it. "He's too small to come to 155," Cerrone said. "His jaw is powerful. He's got good talk. But he

won't fare (well) with the top (lightweight fighters). He might do good with the lower-ranked guys if they do the same thing they did with the (featherweights) and pick and choose his

guys, but if they throw him in the (lightweight) top 10, no way." McGregor's celebrity has grown past every UFC fighter except Ronda Rousey, largely because he has recorded devastating stoppage victories in five straight fights and six of his seven UFC bouts. His vicious striking power has backed up his bold public pronouncements about taking over both divisions.

"I'm looking to replicate what I've achieved in a previous (promotion): a two-weight world champion held consecutively," McGregor said moments after beating Aldo. "I said I would do it, and I will do it." Cerrone understands why McGregor is entertaining the prospect of a lightweight title run. McGregor acknowledges that his weight cut to 145 pounds is grueling, and his coach would prefer that McGregor no longer attempt such dramatic weight loss in the days before his fights.

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Valencia wins under Neville, advances in Copa del Rey

TALES AZZONI
AP Sports Writer

MADRID (AP) — Valencia beat third-tier club Barakaldo 2-0 for Gary Neville's first win as a head coach on Wednesday, advancing to the round of 16 of the Copa del Rey 5-1 on aggregate.

Santi Mina scored in the eighth minute and Alvaro Negredo added in the 31st at the Mestalla Stadium to give Neville the victory in his

third game in charge of the Spanish club.

"I'm happy with the result," Neville said. "Tonight it was important to win to build confidence. We hadn't won in the last couple of weeks. It was important to do it tonight."

Neville was confirmed as head coach just before Valencia won the first leg 3-1, but wasn't on the bench during the game. He watched from the

stands when his team held Barcelona to a 1-1 home draw in the Spanish league. The former England and Manchester United defender debuted with a 2-0 loss to Lyon in the Champions League, a result that eliminated Valencia from the competition. His second game was a 1-1 draw at Eibar in the Spanish league over the weekend. "I think the talent is there, the ability is there," Neville

said. "I saw many individual things that I liked tonight. I think that as a coach you are always thinking about what needs to improve, and there were things that we could have done better tonight, but also things that we did well."

In other games Wednesday, second-division club Mirandes upset Malaga 3-1 on aggregate after a 1-0 win in the second leg, while Eibar advanced 4-3 on ag-

gregate after routing Ponferradina 4-0. The deciding goal was an 85th-minute penalty converted by Mikel Arruabarrena.

Rayo Vallecano eliminated Getafe on away goals despite a 3-1 loss, while Athletic Bilbao had six different scorers in a 6-0 rout of Linense to advance 8-0 on aggregate.

Las Palmas drew 1-1 at Real Sociedad to reach the next round 3-2 on aggregate. □

Roma crashes out of Cup to 2nd-division Spezia on penalties

DANIELLA MATAR
Associated Press

MILAN (AP) — Roma's miserable month continued as it crashed out of the Italian Cup on Wednesday, losing 4-2 on penalties to second-division Spezia.

"On behalf of AS Roma and myself, I want to apologize to the fans for today's game," said Roma's American President James Pallotta on the club's twitter account. "Congratulations to Spezia."

Holder Juventus is safely through to the quarterfinals after sweeping aside 10-man Torino 4-0 in a derby match.

Napoli crushed Hellas Verona 3-0, while relegation-threatened Carpi pulled off an upset, with Antonio Di Gaudio scoring the only goal in a 1-0 victory at Fiorentina.

Both Carpi and Fiorentina hit the woodwork in the first half, while they each had a player sent off in stoppages as Gonzalo Rodriguez and Jerry Mbakogu were dismissed for an off the ball scuffle.



Spezia players celebrate after scoring the decisive goal during the Italian Cup soccer match between Roma and Spezia, at Rome's Olympic stadium, Wednesday, Dec. 16, 2015. Spezia won 4-2 in penalty shootout to advance to the quarterfinals.

Miralem Pjanic and Edin Dzeko missed Roma's first two spot kicks after the match had finished goalless after extra time.

Spezia scored all four of theirs to book a quarterfinal tie against third-division giantkiller Alessandria, which has knocked out Palermo

and Genoa. Roma, which is through to the knockout stages of the Champions League, has not won in any competition since beating Lazio in the capital derby on Nov. 8, leaving coach Rudi Garcia under pressure. The team was resoundly

(Alessandro Di Meo/ANSA via AP)

jeered at the end of each period, while there were several chants against Garcia. "Tonight we were expected to win and we didn't, it's a failure," Garcia said. "We have to weather the storm, recapture the wolf-like spirit, but I will never give up and I will push

the team until the death, if that's what's needed.

"Now the only thing we need to do is not give up and get back to winning ways from Sunday against Genoa. We need character and pride. We are all angry at tonight's performance. You can't go out of the Italian Cup against a Serie B side. We need a different attitude on the pitch."

In Turin, Simone Zaza had given Juventus a first-half lead before Cristian Molinaro was sent off for a second yellow card, four minutes after the break.

Zaza doubled Juve's lead two minutes later and goals from Paulo Dybala and Paul Pogba sealed the win. Juventus will face either last year's runner-up Lazio or Udinese in the quarterfinals. Omar El Kaddouri and Dries Mertens got Napoli off to the perfect start, giving the hosts a 2-0 lead inside 12 minutes. Verona hit the crossbar before substitute Jose Callejon added a third minutes after coming off the bench. □

Dortmund advances in German Cup; Bayern drawn at Bochum

CIARAN FAHEY
Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang scored again Wednesday to help Borussia Dortmund beat Augsburg 2-0 and secure a quarterfinal against Stuttgart in the German Cup.

Bayern Munich, which knocked out holder Wolfsburg in the previous round, was drawn at second-division Bochum, Bayer

Leverkusen is to host Werder Bremen, and Hertha Berlin will be visiting second-division Heidenheim in the other quarterfinals to be played on Feb. 9 and 10.

Aubameyang, the Bundesliga's top-scorer with 18 goals in 16 games, broke the deadlock in the 61st with a quick shot into the left corner after Lukasz Piszczek blocked Ji Dongwon's attempted clear-

ance. Henrikh Mkhitaryan sealed the result for the visitors five minutes later, his shot taking a deflection to give Augsburg 'keeper Marwin Hitz no chance.

Dortmund 'keeper Roman Buerki denied Ji with a good block late on. Dortmund, which routed Paderborn 7-1 in the previous round, last won the cup in 2012 and is bidding

to reach its third successive final.

Bochum won 2-0 at second-division rival 1860 Munich.

Earlier, Hertha and Stuttgart advanced with victories over second-division sides Nuremberg and Eintracht Braunschweig, respectively.

American defender John Anthony Brooks sealed Hertha's 2-0 win at Nuremberg

with a fine header following Vladimir Darida's corner in the 65th minute.

Darida opened the scoring the 32nd, which the visiting fans celebrated with flares, causing a brief hold-up in play.

Bosnia defender Toni Sunjic scored two minutes from the end of extra time for Stuttgart's 3-2 win over Braunschweig. □

Jameis Winston gets a prime-time showcase

BARRY WILNER
Associated Press

(AP) - There actually is a reason to tune in for Thursday night's lackluster matchup of Tampa Bay at St. Louis: Jameis Winston. And maybe the Rams' fine rookie running back, Todd Gurley, too. Both are among perhaps a dozen strong contenders for Offensive Rookie of the

"Very exciting," Winston says of a prime-time opportunity. "I just want to show the world how good this team really is. This is our chance and we have to take advantage of it." As for being the top rookie, well, Winston sees Gurley as the man. "It would be awesome to achieve that goal, but that wasn't on my goal

but this organization. "Definitely our team is way more important than my individual success with goals. I don't focus on that type of stuff, but Todd is having an amazing year and deserves all the credit he is getting." The Rams (No. 25 in AP Pro32) are a 1 1-2 point favorite over Tampa Bay (No. 18 in AP Pro32). The



Tampa Bay Buccaneers quarterback Jameis Winston (3) throws a pass against the New Orleans Saints during the first quarter of an NFL football game Sunday, Dec. 13, 2015, in Tampa, Fla. (AP Photo/Chris O'Meara)

Year, and with the Rams (5-8) and Buccaneers (6-7) not likely to find a way into the postseason, watching the kids seems the best attraction.

list at the beginning of the year," he says. "My goal was to have more wins than last year. We did that, so that's an important goal for us, not only just for me,

Bucs have a decent run defense, good enough to keep them in front in what could be the Rams final game representing St. Louis. □

Vikings still missing 3 defensive starters

BRIAN HALL
Associated Press

EDEN PRAIRIE, Minn. (AP) - The Minnesota Vikings could be without three key defensive starters again Sunday as they try to keep their playoff position. Returning to practice following last Thursday's game, linebacker Anthony Barr, defensive tackle Linval Joseph and safety Harrison Smith were held out on Tuesday. The Vikings host Chicago on Sunday, one game behind Green Bay in the NFC North but with an outside chance at clinching a playoff spot with a victory. Starting safety Andrew Sendejo (knee) and backup linebacker Brandon Watts (rib) returned to

practice. But Minnesota was also without backup defensive end Scott Crichton, who ran on the side during Tuesday's practice. Barr, Joseph, Sendejo, Smith and Watts missed last week's 23-20 loss at Arizona. Joseph (foot) has missed the past two games. "The reason you have a football team, that you comprise a football team of two and three deep is because there's injuries," said Terence Newman, who shifted from his normal cornerback spot to safety in last week's game. "There's 100 percent injury rate. So, the coaches do a good job of finding guys that are able to fit in to what they like to do; guys that, first off know what to do and know

how to do it." Barr (groin/hand) and Smith (knee/hamstring) were held out last week after missing much of the previous week's game against Seattle. Smith did participate in the pre-practice stretch on Tuesday. Barr, Smith and Joseph are second, third and fourth, respectively, on the team in tackles. Against Arizona's top-ranked offense, the Vikings had Newman playing out of position, undrafted rookie Anthony Harris playing every snap on defense in his first week after being elevated from the practice squad and first-round rookie Trae Waynes playing 61 of the 67 defensive snaps at cornerback. □

AP: Veterans provide steadying presence for Pittsburgh Steelers

WILL GRAVES
Associated Press

PITTSBURGH (AP) -- The 38-year-old linebacker, the one who retired for 18 days last fall, provided the pressure. The 30-year-old cornerback that never gets hurt and never gets credit provided the pick-six that swung momentum decisively in favor of the Pittsburgh Steelers. Oh, and don't forget the 33-year-old tight end fighting off a promising newcomer, or the 32-year-old running back with a chip on his shoulder roughly the size of Altoona. Even at the tail end of a youth movement a half-decade in the making, the old guys can still play. Pittsburgh's latest December surge includes a handful of familiar faces making familiar contributions at a time in their career when the window was supposed to be closing, if not already completely shut. James Harrison. William Gay. DeAngelo Williams. Heath Miller. All on the wrong side of 30 in an increasingly young man's game. All still vital parts of a team that suddenly looks as dangerous as any in the AFC as the Steelers (8-5) prepare to face Denver (10-3) on Sunday. Miller played through a rib injury that forced him to sit out a week by catching 10 passes for 66 yards, including a handful of third-down grabs that extended drives. He's providing a silent, steadying force in a huddle that includes a trio of 20-something wide receivers and a handful of linemen who were still in high school when Miller entered the league in 2005. "When (Miller) is on the field, he gets you going," said Steelers offensive guard David DeCastro. "Making those tough catches in traffic with those sore ribs. You just try to mirror the way he plays." It's why coach Mike Tomlin offered a slight correc-

tion last week when asked if he was getting more comfortable with rookie tight end Jesse James as "a starting tight end" while Miller dealt with his rib injury. "Let's hold out on the starting tight end," Tomlin said. "Jesse is doing some nice things." But he's not Miller, whom quarterback Ben Roethlisberger (33 himself) called "the best teammate I've ever been around." Miller, in his typical fashion, downplays any such praise. Last he checked, he's just doing his job, one of the reasons he barely noticed all the chirping done on both sides in Pittsburgh's decisive 33-20 victory. "Between the whistles we know it's going to be physical," Miller said. "What happens before or after, I don't really pay attention to because it doesn't matter. You want to bring that mindset into every game. We knew it was going to be a playoff-type game." So maybe it's no surprise some of the most impactful plays were made by a handful of guys with a Super Bowl ring (or two) at home. With the Steelers leading by nine early in the third quarter and the Bengals attempting to generate momentum, Harrison crashed in from the edge on second-year quarterback AJ McCarron. The soft, late throw gave Gay all the time he needed to step in front of the pass and race 23 yards to the end zone to put Pittsburgh up 23-7. The score was Gay's fifth of his career, tying him with Hall of Famer Rod Woodson for the franchise record. Heady territory for a guy who has spent most of his career in the shadow of higher profile teammates Troy Polamalu and Ike Taylor. Both are gone now, and Gay is suddenly the wise sage, though one who knows how to have a good time. □



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BATTER'S BOX AP: Bartolo Colon agrees to \$7.25M deal with Mets

NEW YORK (AP) — A person familiar with the negotiations says 42-year-old pitcher Bartolo Colon has agreed to a \$7.25 million, one-year contract to remain with the New York Mets. The person spoke on condition of anonymity Wednesday because the deal had not been announced. Colon was 14-13 with a 4.16 ERA in 31 starts and two relief appearances, then had a 2.08 ERA in seven relief appearances during the postseason. On Sept. 5 against Miami, he became the oldest Mets pitcher to throw a shutout and he entertained fans with a nifty behind-the-back toss on a grounder. Colon is 218-154 in 18 big league seasons. He could join Matt Harvey, Jacob deGrom, Noah Syndergaard and Steven Matz in the rotation until Zack Wheeler returns next summer from Tommy John surgery.

Ex-Yankee Jones agrees to 1-year contract in Japan

TOKYO (AP) — Ex-New York Yankees first baseman Garrett Jones has agreed to a one-year contract with the Yomiuri Giants in Japan. The club announced the deal on its official website Wednesday. The deal is reportedly worth \$2.5 million plus incentives and bonuses. The 34-year-old Jones hit .215 with five home runs and 17 RBIs in 57 games for the Yankees this season. He has a .251 career batting average with 122 home runs. □

Cuban-born baseball stars offer tips, training for youth

ANDREA RODRIGUEZ
Associated Press

HAVANA (AP) — More than 100 Cuban boys wearing the uniforms of local baseball teams stood in rows, smiling nervously Wednesday as they got tips and training from some of their

baseball stars who have stayed on the island, the major league stars divided the youths into five groups and ran them through calisthenics and batting, pitching and catching drills. And they offered their advice.

major leagues was a landmark in the new relationship between Cuba and the United States and a dramatic manifestation of Cuba's shifting attitude toward the hundreds of players who have abandoned the country that

Major League Baseball Players Association executives planned to talk business with their Cuban counterparts, saying they were optimistic about sealing a deal by early next year for the Tampa Bay Rays to play two spring training games in Cuba. They also hope to make progress toward creating a legal route for Cuban players to make their way to the major leagues.

"There's some hurdles to negotiate, there's no question, and hopefully this trip of goodwill will make the conversations work better," said Major League Baseball chief baseball officer Joe Torre.

When they weren't getting tips or training, the boys asked their idols to sign baseball, or have their photograph taken together.

Pena, dressed in his St. Louis team jersey, said he was happy "to come back to see my family, to share with them."

The player said he also enjoyed meeting with his young fans in Havana. Another clinic was planned Thursday in Matanzas, east of the capital.

Traditionally, Cuban state television has avoided airing games featuring defectors but fans watch their idols' performances on pirated recordings distributed on computer USB drives.

Most sports experts agree that the future does not look bright without a solution to the problem of baseball talent fleeing the country.

But fans who gathered to see the Cuban baseball stars said their return to the island filled them with optimism. □



White Sox first baseman Jose Abreu, from Cuba, gives a baseball clinic to children in Havana, Cuba, Wednesday, Dec. 16, 2015. A group of Cuban-born baseball stars once disdained by the island's government for defecting to the United States taught their craft to some of the island's youngest players on Wednesday as part of a triumphant return to Cuba.

(AP Photo/Ramon Espinosa)

major league idols — men who were born on the island and were once disdained by the Communist government for defecting to the United States.

Los Angeles Dodgers outfielder Yasiel Puig, St. Louis Cardinals catcher Brayan Pena and Chicago White Sox first baseman Jose Abreu were among those who ran 10- and 11-year-old Cuban players through a three-hour skills camp on the second day of a three-day mission meant to warm relations between Major League Baseball and Cuba.

Joined by pitcher Pedro Luis Lazo and other Cuban

"We're going to give our best on this visit and we appreciate the opportunity we've been given," said Yasiel Puig, who left Cuba illegally in 2012. "Everything else we leave to God and destiny."

Eleven-year-old Yassel Veranes grinned widely as he waited for the clinic to begin.

"It's my dream to be here to see them," said the boy, who was brought to Havana's Latinoamericano Stadium by his father, Elio Veranes, who watched the proceedings with pride.

The official return on Tuesday of baseball defectors earning millions in the ma-

trained them.

One year ago this week, Presidents Barack Obama and Raul Castro announced that their countries were restoring diplomatic ties, opening the door for better baseball relations between the countries.

Cuba and the United States always have shared a love of baseball, despite deep political and ideological differences over the years.

From the Negro Leagues to the current crop of Cuban stars, the communist island and the U.S. are linked by century-old baseball ties. During their current trip,

NHL Capsules:

Gostisbehere nets winner as Flyers top Hurricanes 4-3 in OT

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Shayne Gostisbehere scored 1:42 into overtime, lifting Philadelphia past Jeff Skinner and the Carolina Hurricanes.

Jakub Voracek had a goal and two assists, and Brayden Schenn and Sean Couturier also scored for the Flyers, who won their seventh in 11 games while improving to 7-6 in overtime.

Skinner had his second hat trick in three games and the third of his career for the Hurricanes. He has nine goals in his last six games. Gostisbehere netted the game-winner after receiving a backhand pass from Voracek. Gostisbehere also had the winning goal in overtime in Philadelphia's 3-2 victory over Carolina on Nov. 23.

Michal Neuvirth, Philadelphia's backup, made his 14th start and third straight. He finished with 29 saves while improving to 8-4-2.

AVALANCHE 3, BLACK-HAWKS 0

CHICAGO (AP) — Semyon Varlamov stopped 29 shots for his first shutout of the season, leading the Colorado Avalanche to a 3-0 victory over Chicago on Tuesday night and snapping Blackhawks star Patrick Kane's points streak at

26 games. Matt Duchene had a goal and an assist for the Avalanche, who won their third



Philadelphia Flyers' Shayne Gostisbehere, right, and Claude Giroux celebrate after Gostisbehere's goal during overtime in an NHL hockey game against the Carolina Hurricanes, Tuesday, Dec. 15, 2015, in Philadelphia. Philadelphia won 4-3.

(AP Photo/Matt Slocum)

straight to cap a perfect four-day road trip to Nashville, St. Louis and Chicago. Zach Redmond scored in the second period and Gabriel Landeskog added an empty-netter with 1:57 left. Varlamov was sharp when needed in earning his 19th career shutout and third against Chicago. But for most of the game, Colorado limited Chicago's chances — and Kane.

Kane's franchise-record streak was the longest since Mats Sundin's 30-game stretch in 1992-93. The Chi-

cago right wing had 16 goals and 24 assists during the run, and has points in all but three of the Black-

hawks' 32 games.

STARS 5, BLUE JACKETS 1

DALLAS (AP) — Tyler Seguin broke open a tight game with two second-period goals 30 seconds apart in Dallas' victory over Columbus.

Defensemen Johnny Oduya and Alex Goligoski each scored to give the Stars one-goal leads in the first and second.

Scott Hartnell scored on the power play for Columbus at 4:32 of the second before Goligoski's goal at 13:02

gave the Stars a lead they never relinquished. Seguin's 16th and 17th goals came at 16:26 and 16:56.

Columbus rookie Joonas Korpisalo had 23 saves before Curtis McElhinney replaced him for the third period. McElhinney stopped six shots but gave up a goal to rookie Mattias Janmark.

BLUES 4, JETS 3

WINNIPEG, Manitoba (AP) — Paul Stastny scored the tiebreaking goal with 3:38 left in regulation, and St. Louis fought back from a two-goal deficit to defeat Winnipeg.

After Jets forward Mark Scheifele hit the post with a shot, the Blues moved the puck the other way and Vladimir Tarasenko fed a pass across to Stastny. He put a shot off the post and past rookie goalie Connor Hellebuyck.

Alexander Steen and Tarasenko each scored on the power play, and Troy Brouwer also had a goal for St. Louis. Jake Allen stopped 33 shots. Steen, Tarasenko and Kevin Shattenkirk had two assists apiece.

The loss halted a three-game home winning streak for the Jets, who got goals from Scheifele, Chris Thorburn and Drew Stafford. Hellebuyck made 22 saves.

Winnipeg had a 3-1 lead in the second period before the Blues mounted their comeback.

SHARKS 3, CANADIENS 1

MONTREAL (AP) — Joe Pavelski scored once and added an assist as San Jose beat Montreal to snap a six-game skid.

Patrick Marleau and Dainius Zubrus also scored for the Sharks. Martin Jones made 26 saves for his 13th victory of the season.

Dale Weise had the goal for Montreal.

Dustin Tokarski, making his third consecutive start, stopped nine of 12 shots before being pulled midway through the second period. Mike Condon stopped all six shots he faced in relief. San Jose, which earned its first victory in December, is 12-0 when leading after two periods.

RANGERS 4, OILERS 2

NEW YORK (AP) — Rick Nash and Mats Zuccarello each had a goal and an assist as New York ended Edmonton's six-game winning streak.

Dylan McIlrath scored his first NHL goal and Jesper Fast added an empty-netter in the final seconds to help the Rangers snap a three-game slide. □

NBA Capsules:

LeBron, Cavaliers coast past Celtics with 89-77 victory

BOSTON (AP) — **BOSTON (AP)** — LeBron James scored 24 points to lead the Cleveland Cavaliers to an 89-77 victory over the Boston Celtics on Tuesday night in an uneventful rematch of their bruising first-round playoff series last season.

Kevin Love had 20 points and eight rebounds in his first game back in Boston since Kelly Olynyk yanked his shoulder out of socket in the playoffs. Jae Crowder, who took a punch in the jaw from J.R. Smith in the series, scored 14 for the Celtics.

Timofey Mozgov had nine

points and a season-high 10 rebounds, scoring seven with five boards in the third quarter when Cleveland turned a five-point deficit into a 10-point lead. The Cavaliers have won three in a row since losing three straight to start the month. Avery Bradley scored 17 points for Boston, which was back home for the first time since taking the then-unbeaten Golden State Warriors to double overtime.

NUGGETS 112, TIMBERWOLVES 100

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Randy Foye scored 19 points,

and Denver picked up its sixth win in seven games.

Kenneth Faried added 19 points and 10 rebounds, Will Barton had 14 points, seven boards and five assists, and the Nuggets shot 56 percent against the porous Timberwolves defense. Foye broke out of a season-long slump to hit 5 of 6 3-pointers, and the Nuggets hit 10 of 18 from deep as a team.

Zach LaVine had 20 points and five assists and Andrew Wiggins scored 23 points for the Timberwolves, who have lost seven of their last eight games. They are 3-10 at home this season.

KINGS 107, ROCKETS 97

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — Sacramento star DeMarcus Cousins' manager was ejected for slapping at Rockets guard Jason Terry during the Kings' win over Houston.

Trailing the play on a dunk by Sacramento's Ben McLemore, Terry put his hand out to slow down as he neared fans sitting along the baseline.

Andrew Rogers, Cousins' manager, slapped at Terry's arm. Terry stopped, turned around and started to step toward Rogers, who was then ejected from his

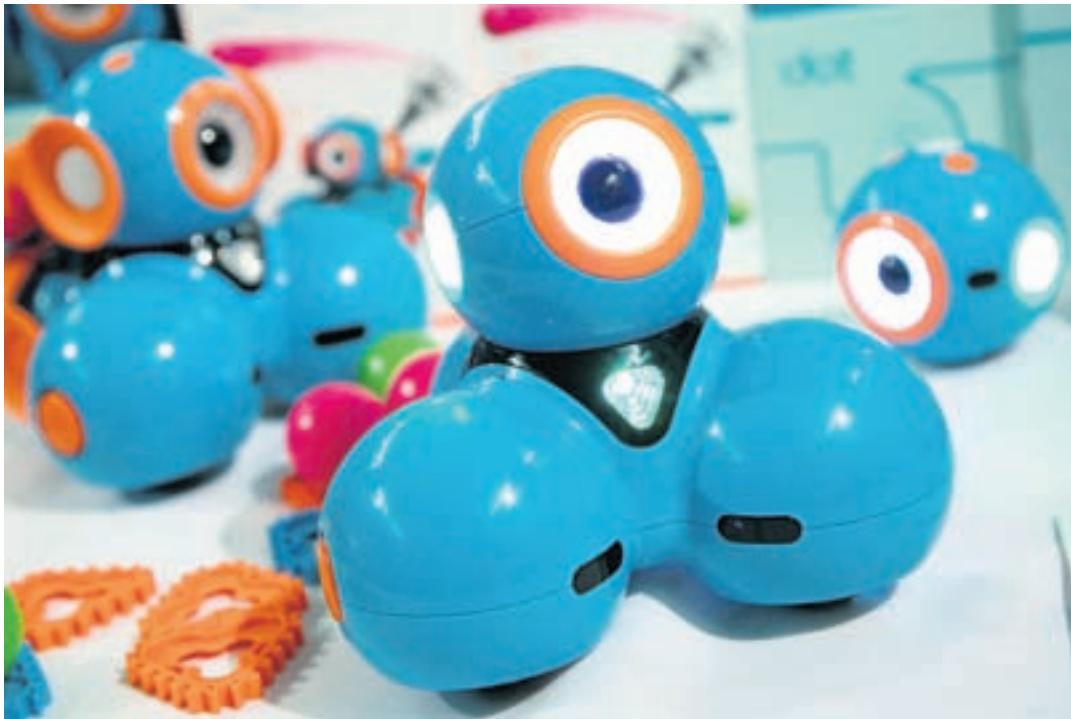
seat. Cousins had 26 points and 12 rebounds. The Kings never trailed after the midway point in the second quarter in a sloppy game that included 49 turnovers and three technical fouls, one on Cousins.

Starting for suspended Rajon Rondo, Darren Collison had 14 points, a season-high 13 assists and six rebounds as the Kings won their third in a row. Rondo was penalized one game by the NBA for using a gay slur toward official Bill Kennedy in a recent game.

James Harden had 33 points for Houston. □

Tech Toys:

There's a new crop of coding toys for techie tykes



Dash, a robot from Wonder Workshop, is displayed at the TPM Holiday Showcase in New York. When it comes to computer science education, the U.S. lags beyond most other industrial countries, but some developers are hoping to change that, with robots and video games designed to teach kids as young as five the basics of coding.

(AP Photo/Mark Lennihan)

BREE FOWLER
AP Technology Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Want even your younger kids to join the tech revolution by learning to code? Maybe you should get them a robot — or at least a video game.

That's the aim of entrepreneurs behind new coding toys for kids as young as 6. They're spurred by a desire to get children interested in computer science well before their opinions about what's cool and what's not start to gel, in effect hoping to turn young boys and girls — especially girls — into tomorrow's geeks.

"You really want kids to learn these building blocks as young as possible and then build on them," Apple CEO Tim Cook said in an interview at a recent coding workshop for third-graders in New York. "I don't think you can start this too young."

Not everyone is excited about pushing first-graders to learn the nuts and bolts of how computers work. Some critics believe that too much technology too early can interfere with a child's natural development; others warn that pushing advanced concepts on younger kids could frustrate them and

turn them off computer-science completely.

But there's a nationwide push to improve computer literacy in elementary school — and entrepreneurs are jumping aboard. Growing up in India, Vikas Gupta learned to program at a young age and was amazed at what he could do with a basic computer and some software. Now, the father of two wants today's kids to get the same feeling from the coding robots his startup produces.

His company, Wonder Workshop, started shipping Dash and Dot, a pair of small, programmable blue-and-orange robots, late last year. Kids can interact with the devices in a variety of ways. In the most basic, kids draw a path for Dash, which resembles a small, wheeled pyramid made of spheres, on a tablet screen. They can then drag and drop actions onto its path that, for instance, might cause Dash to beep or flash its lights in different colors.

More advanced kids can use Google's kid-oriented Blockly language, or Wonder, the company's own programming language, to create and play games with both robots. The idea is to make building sets of

increasingly complex instructions so intuitive and fun that it sparks children's natural curiosity about the way things work.

"It's going to be relevant for whichever profession kids choose in 20 years," Gupta says. "Doctors, architects, anyone; they will

formed reasonably firm likes and dislikes, making them less likely to try new things. That's particularly true when it comes to girls; while robotics and coding activities tend to be popular with both genders early on, the percentage of girls involved drops dramatically as kids get older.

Toy robots can be very helpful in teaching coding basics, says Chase Cunningham, a father of 4- and 7-year-old girls who writes "The Cynja," a comic book about warriors who fight computer "bad guys" such as zombies, worms and botnets.

"Immediately, they get to see the return, because the robots move," says Cunningham, who by day handles threat intelligence for the cybersecurity firm Armor. "Kids need that immediate reward."

But these kinds of toys are so new that there's no way to know if they actually stimulate long-term interest in coding or whether they affect healthy brain development.

"Kids need to directly ex-

perience things, to invent purely out of their imagination without any preprocessed experience," says Karen Sobel Lojeski, a Stony Brook University child-development researcher with a computer-science background. The introduction of

electronic toys at a young age could hinder that, she says. Nader Hamda, founder of a handful of tech and toy startups, loved seeing his two young daughters embrace technology, but like Lojeski worried when they spent hours alone with their tablets. So, he created Ozobot, a tiny programmable robot that kids can play with together.

"I wanted to recreate the experience of the family game night, where the whole family is huddled around the game," he says. Kids can program Ozobot, which is smaller than a golf ball, simply by drawing different colored lines and shapes with markers. Older kids can also program in Blockly and can even see what their finished code would look like in JavaScript, a language widely used to program websites. Hamda says roughly 400 schools currently use Ozobot as a hands-on teaching tool.

The SPRK, from Colorado startup Sphero, has also found a niche in elemen-



An Ozobot is demonstrated during the CE Week show, in New York.

(AP Photo/Richard Drew)

need to be able to understand how machines work in order to be really, really good at their jobs."

Middle school may be too late to start robotics and coding classes, proponents say. By that point, most children have

perience things, to invent purely out of their imagination without any preprocessed experience," says Karen Sobel Lojeski, a Stony Brook University child-development researcher with a computer-science background. The introduction of

tary and middle schools, which use the clear plastic robot ball to illustrate concepts such as algebra and geometry. Among other things, says Sphero CEO Paul Berberian, the robots teach kids that making mistakes is part of learning. □

US industrial production has worst month since 2012

PAUL WISEMAN

AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. industrial output fell for the third straight month in November, another sign that American manufacturers are under stress.

American industrial production dropped 0.6 per-

cent last month, the Federal Reserve said Wednesday. It was the biggest drop since March 2012. Manufacturing output was flat after expanding 0.3 percent in October.

Utility output plunged 4.3 percent as unusually warm weather reduced demand

for heat. Mining production slid 1.1 percent amid continued cutbacks in the oil and gas industry and a big drop in coal mining. Output at manufacturers of cars and auto parts dropped 1 percent last month. Aircraft manufacturing output fell 0.7 per-

cent. American industry is being hurt by economic weakness overseas and a strong dollar that makes U.S. goods more expensive in foreign markets. Still, the American economy is relatively healthy thanks to solid consumer spending.

The Federal Reserve is expected on Wednesday to raise the short-term interest rate that it has kept near zero for seven years. The hike could push the dollar even higher if increased U.S. rates lure investors away from overseas markets. □

Stocks jump after Fed finally raises interest rates

MARLEY JAY

AP Markets Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Stocks climbed Wednesday after the Federal Reserve raised interest rates, a long-expected vote of confidence in the U.S. economy. At the same time investors were encouraged that the Fed emphasized that further increases will be gradual.

The market was slightly higher at midday and rose steadily through the afternoon after the Fed released its policy statement and as Fed Chair Janet Yellen gave a news conference explaining the Fed's decision.

The Dow Jones industrial average rose 224.18 points, or 1.3 percent, to 17,749.09. The Standard & Poor's 500 index added 29.66 points, or 1.5 percent, to 2,073.07. The Nasdaq composite gained 75.77 points, or 1.5 percent, to 5,071.13.

The market finished higher for the third day in a row, something that hadn't happened in almost two months. The S&P 500 is up 3 percent over the last three days.

The biggest gainers were sectors known for paying big dividends. Utilities surged 2.6 percent, while telecommunications and consumer goods mak-

ers rose 2 percent. Only the energy sector finished lower as the price of oil dropped and natural gas continued to fall.

Paul Christopher, head global market strategist at Wells Fargo Investment Institute, said investors think big dividend payers might pay even more out to shareholders and buy back more stock because as interest rates rise, they'll be reluctant to spend a lot of money on equipment.

The Federal Reserve raised its main interest rate by a quarter of a point, a move that was widely anticipated in the markets. That rate had been near zero for seven years.

For months the Fed has been suggesting it would raise borrowing costs from their historically low levels because the U.S. economy has improved a great deal since the financial crisis and the Great Recession. The S&P 500 has more than doubled since the Federal funds rate was cut to zero in 2008. Unemployment, which peaked at 10 percent, is now at five percent.

The Fed emphasized Wednesday that it plans to raise interest rates slowly.

Stephen Freedman, senior investment strategist at



Specialist Edward Loggie works at his post on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange as the rate decision of the Federal Reserve is announced, Wednesday, Dec. 16, 2015. The Fed's move to lift its key rate by a quarter-point to a range of 0.25 percent to 0.5 percent ends an extraordinary seven-year period of near-zero rates that began at the depths of the 2008 financial crisis.

(AP Photo/Richard Drew)

UBS Wealth Management Americas, said the Fed is "taking off the Band-Aid" because the economy has healed substantially.

"Three or four hikes next year would be, historically speaking, extremely slow and progressive," he said. "The Fed is not going to choke the economy."

The boost in interest rates lifted metals prices. The yield on the two-year Treasury note also rose to its highest level in five years.

Oil prices and energy stocks skidded after the U.S. government said oil stockpiles grew 4.8 million barrels last week. The price of oil has plunged to its lowest levels in more than six years because supplies continued to rise as the global economy struggles. Benchmark U.S. crude dropped \$1.83, or 4.9 percent, to close at \$35.52 a barrel in New York. Brent crude, a benchmark for international oils, lost \$1.26,

or 3.3 percent, to \$37.19 a barrel in London. U.S. crude had climbed over the last two days after falling beneath \$35 a barrel Monday.

Pioneer Natural Resources lost \$10.18, or 7 percent, to \$134.40 and Devon Energy dropped \$1.30, or 4.1 percent, to \$30.57.

Natural gas, which has dropped to 16-year-lows, lost 3.2 cents to close at \$1.79 per 1,000 cubic feet. □

Toyota plans to sell more than 10 million vehicles next year

YURI KAGEYAMA

AP Business Writer

TOKYO (AP) — Toyota is expecting to sell more than 10 million vehicles in 2016 but little changed from what it expects to sell this year.

Toyota Motor Corp., the world's top-selling automaker for the last three years straight, said Wednes-

day it expects sales of 10.114 million vehicles next year and 10.098 million this year. Volkswagen AG, which overtook Toyota in sales in the first half of the year, suffered in the second half from an emissions cheating scandal. Its diesel cars were found equipped with software that cheated

emissions tests.

Auto sales in major markets such as the U.S. and Japan weren't expected to grow significantly, according to Toyota, while emerging markets that had sustained growth in recent years were off the boil. Overall auto sales were recently slowing in countries such as Thai-

land and Indonesia.

Last year, Toyota, which makes the Prius hybrid, Camry sedan and Lexus luxury models, sold 10.23 million vehicles. Volkswagen sold 10.14 million vehicles, and General Motors was third at 9.92 million vehicles.

Detroit-based GM, which

makes the Cadillac and Open cars, was the top-selling automaker for more than seven decades until being surpassed by Toyota in 2008.

GM retook the sales crown for one year in 2011, when a tsunami and quake disaster struck northeastern Japan, disrupting production. □



Surveyors work next to Canadian Pacific Rail trains which are parked on the train tracks in Toronto.

(AP Photo/Nathan Denette)

Canadian Pacific sweetens its offer to buy Norfolk Southern

JOSH FUNK
AP Business Writer

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Canadian Pacific is increasing its offer to buy Norfolk Southern railroad by adding a payment that would vary depending on the stock price of the new company.

Canadian Pacific CEO Hunter Harrison said Wednesday that his company remains committed to the deal despite Norfolk Southern's opposition. He wants shareholders of the Norfolk, Virginia, railroad to decide whether to pursue it.

Norfolk Southern has already rejected two previous offers from Canadian Pacific, and the two railroads have started issuing dueling news releases at every step of the process. Harrison said he still hopes to sit down and negotiate, but he is committed to the deal.

"If this is going to be a street fight, so be it," Harrison said.

Norfolk Southern said in a statement that its board will carefully review the latest offer, but noted that little had changed from the earlier offers it rejected.

Canadian Pacific said its new offer could add as much as \$3.4 billion to its previous offer that it estimated was worth between \$37 billion and \$42 billion. That value is based on the projected value of stock in a new company that would own both railroads. Norfolk Southern has said the previous offer was worth roughly \$27 billion

based on current share prices and "grossly inadequate."

In the latest offer, Canadian Pacific is offering to pay Norfolk Southern investors up to roughly \$11.30 per share more if shares of the combined company are worth less than \$175 in October 2017. But if the shares are worth more than \$175, that payment would be reduced to zero.

One of the key questions is whether federal regulators would approve such a merger. No major railroad mergers have been completed since the Surface Transportation Board issued tough rules for them in 2001.

S&P Capital IQ analyst Jim Corridore said he thinks there is little chance that regulators will approve this deal, and he expects Norfolk Southern to reject this latest offer, so a proxy battle appears likely.

Canadian Pacific officials remain confident this deal would be approved because they have included several details designed to increase competition between railroads.

But Norfolk Southern has said it doesn't think regulators would approve the deal, so investors are better off if the railroad remains independent.

Canadian Pacific's offer has the support of board member Bill Ackman, who leads activist investment firm Pershing Square. Ackman said Wednesday that if this Norfolk Southern deal fails, Canadian Pacific will pursue other railroads. □

Valeant's outlook for 2016 grows grim

LINDA A. JOHNSON
AP Business Writer

Embattled Valeant Pharmaceuticals Inc. has slashed its expectations for the fourth quarter and all of 2015 and issued a guarded outlook for 2016, primarily due to lower sales after Congressional and media scrutiny forced it to end a questionable distribution arrangement for its lucrative dermatology and ophthalmology medicines. Chief Executive Officer Michael Pearson said Wednesday that Valeant should be judged based on its ongoing growth and strategy and its "great brands," not its small research budget or the controversial business practices that have triggered government probes and created turmoil.

"We've ignored the ex-

pected, on average, \$3.47 per share. For 2016, Valeant expects adjusted earnings to range between \$13.25 and \$13.75 per share, below expectations for \$14.20. Chief Financial Officer Robert Rosiello said the 2015 forecast was hurt by an expected reduction of \$600 million in revenue, or \$1.45 per share. That includes the costs of ending its Philidor distribution deal — responsible for nearly all of the 20 percent drop in prescriptions filled in the fourth

quarter — and transitioning to the new Walgreens deal, plus canceling some planned price increases. "You'll not see abnormally high price increases at all, this year or next," Pearson said.

Valeant has grown rapidly since Pearson joined the then-small company in 2008 and instituted a strategy of buying smaller drug developers, hiking drug prices and then slashing spending on research on new drugs. Among the more egregious examples, Valeant bought the life-saving heart drugs Nitropress and Isuprel in February, then tripled the price of one and raised the other sixfold.

Pearson noted the company was the first to do a tax inversion, moving its official tax headquarters from the

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This photo shows the head office and logo of Valeant Pharmaceuticals in Montreal. Valeant has issued a guarded outlook for 2016, primarily due to lower sales.

(Ryan Remiorz/The Canadian Press/AP)

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U.S. to Laval, Quebec, to reduce its tax rate, and that it now has the pharmaceutical industry's lowest tax rate.

He said Valeant could get three new drugs approved next year, when the company plans to use its cash flow to pay down debt, rather than acquire more businesses.

"Next year, we'll be about a \$13 billion company. We will have double-digit organic growth, not just next year, but the year after that and the year after," Pearson predicted. □

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Arctic posts record warmth over land; less ice

MALCOLM RITTER
 AP Science Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The warming Arctic has set another record.

The average air temperature over Arctic land reached 2.3 degrees F (1.3 degrees C) above average for the year ending in September. That's the highest since observations began in 1900. The new mark was noted in the annual Arctic Report Card, released this week by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The Arctic centers on the North Pole and reaches into North America and Eurasia. "Warming is happening more than twice as fast in the Arctic than anywhere else in the world. We know this is due to climate change," NOAA chief scientist Rick Spinrad told reporters in San Francisco at a meeting of the American Geophysical Union.

Another record emerged for sea ice, which appears when Arctic Ocean water freezes. When it reached its peak coverage in February, it was the lowest maximum extent since records began in 1979. The minimum ice coverage, reached in September, was the fourth lowest on record. The retreat of sea ice is considered a threat to animals like walrus, which use it for mating, giving birth and getting out of the water. Walrus can use land instead to leave the water, but they are crowding



This 2008 photo made with a fisheye lens shows ice floes in Baffin Bay above the Arctic Circle, seen from the Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker Louis S. St-Laurent. In the annual Arctic Report Card, released Tuesday, Dec. 15, 2015 by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, a record emerged for sea ice, which appears when Arctic Ocean water freezes. When its extent peaked for the year in February 2015, it was the lowest maximum coverage since records began in 1979. Scientists had previously announced that the minimum extent, reached in September 2015, was the fourth lowest on record.

(AP Photo/The Canadian Press, Jonathan Hayward)

onto beaches where a stampede can be devastating for calves, two editors of the report card told AP. Walrus have been hauling themselves out on land in northwest Alaska, a recent phenomenon, Martin Jeffries of the federal Office of Naval Research and Jackie Richter-Menge of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers wrote in a joint email.

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AP Interview: Fukushima chief says 'no textbook' for cleanup

YURI KAGEYAMA
 AP Business Writer

TOKYO (AP) — The man leading the daunting task of dealing with the Fukushima nuclear plant that sank into meltdowns in northeastern Japan warns with surprising candor: Nothing can be promised.

How long will it take to decommission the three breached reactors, and how will it be accomplished, when not even robots have been able to enter the main fuel-debris areas so far? How much will it ultimately cost? Naohiro Masuda, tapped last year as chief of decontamination and decommissioning for plant owner Tokyo Electric Power Co., acknowledges he is a long way from answering those questions definitively.

"This is something that has never been experienced. A textbook doesn't exist for something like this," Masuda told The Associated Press in an interview at TEPCO's Tokyo headquarters this week.

It's only recently the daily situation at Fukushima Dai-ichi has even started to approach "normal," he said. Since the March 2011 meltdowns, TEPCO has had to face one huge challenge after another, including storing masses of leaking radioactive water, clearing up rubble and removing fuel rods from a crumbled building.

"Before, it was a war zone," Masuda said quietly. Masuda's approach contrasts with the sometimes ambitious, sometimes wishful announcements by the Japanese government, which pronounced the disaster "under control" as early as late 2011, just months after a devastating tsunami knocked out power to the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant, setting off the meltdowns.

But in June, the government and TEPCO acknowledged the target dates in the official "roadmap" for decommissioning had to be pushed back by about two years. Now even the most optimistic projections estimate the work will take about half a century.

Masuda said without hesitation that more delays could be in order. No one knows exactly where the melted nuclear debris is sitting in the reactors, let alone how exactly the debris might be taken out. Computer simulation and speculative images are all he has so far.

New science will have to be invented for the plant to be cleaned up. Each step of the way, safety and consequences must be weighed, for workers and for the environment alike, Masuda added.

Under the latest plan, the removal of the fuel debris is expected to start within a decade. Still, Masuda likened such goals to reminders not to slack off, rather than hard deadlines based on real-life assessments.

The March 2011 catastrophe is unprecedented. Unlike the 1979 partial meltdown at Three Mile Island in the U.S., the containment, where the morass of fuel lies, has been breached at Fukushima Dai-ichi plant. Radioactive water is piling up: 300 tons a day by the latest count.

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Hit the alarm: 'Star Wars' wakes again with new release

JAKE COYLE
AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Cue the scrolling of yellow words into outer space: "Star Wars" is back.

It has taken more than \$4 billion, the passing of the torch from George Lucas to J.J. Abrams and enough anticipation to fuel a Death Star, but the force has finally been stirred. Countdown clocks, set in October 2012 when the Walt Disney Co. purchased Lucasfilm, will hit zero on Thursday night in the US when "The Force Awakens" debuts.

Once again, packed movie theaters will echo with the rousing themes of John Williams and the buzz of lightsabers.

The opening follows a year of intensely watched dribbles of trailer footage, one of the grandest premieres in Hollywood history and a largely glowing critical response that has pushed fan fervor into hyper-speed — even as many die-hards, clutching their advance tickets, cover their ears and anxiously yell "No spoilers!" Much is at stake, from the bottom line of Disney to the hearts of "Star Wars" devotees whose faith was severely tested (but far from extinguished) the last time "Star Wars" returned: in 1999 with the first of a clunky trilogy of prequels.

As the galaxy far, far away again descends over the globe, a handful of questions surround "The Force Awakens."

IS IT ANY GOOD?

Critics, embargoed until early Wednesday morning, have roundly praised "The Force Awakens" as a return to form for the franchise and a loving resurrection of the space opera.

The general feeling is that the movie balances old (the original stars, hand-crafted effects) and new (the heirs apparent Daisy Ridley and John Boyega) in a kind of greatest hits of "Star Wars" that, while it may not chart much new ground, flows with the spirit of the original movies. The force is strong with it.

The New York Times' Manohla Dargis said "it seamlessly balances cozy favorites ... and new kinetic wows." Variety's Justin Lang wrote that the film reinvigorates the saga, even if "fan service takes priority here over a somewhat thin, derivative story."

The AP's Lindsey Bahr said the film "is no more and no less than the movie that made us love it in the first place. In fact, it's basically the same thing." Ultimate judgment, however, doesn't sit with critics but with the fans.

HOW MUCH WILL IT MAKE?
For months it's been the favorite parlor game of the movie industry. Will it pass the record \$208.8 million domestic debut of "Jurassic World" in June? The December marketplace is a different beast than the early summer; the previous top December opening is the \$84.6 million for 2012's "The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey."

It goes without saying that "The Force Awakens" will smash that.

It's already sold more than \$100 million worth of pre-sales. Rival studio executives peg a debut above \$200 million and likely surpassing "Jurassic World."

Analysts, though, caution that the opening weekend is only part of the story for "The Force Awakens." Given Disney's investment and planned rollout of sequels and spinoffs for years to come, the more significant box-office fate of "The Force Awakens" will be told over weeks and months.

"The real key here is where we are in March," says Paul Dergarabedian, senior media analyst for box office data firm Rentrak. "This movie gets into the \$1 billion club without breaking a sweat."

While the film's all-powerful merchandising soaks up holiday sales, Disney will hope that "The Force Awakens" plays like "Avatar" and "Titanic" — movies that remained top draws through January and benefited from repeat viewings. The film opens most



This photo provided by Disney/Lucasfilm shows stormtroopers in a scene from the new film, "Star Wars: The Force Awakens."

(Film Frame/Lucasfilm via AP)

everywhere internationally this weekend, but doesn't land in China until Jan. 9.

WHO'S THE BREAKOUT STAR?

There are many contend-

ers here, led by the fierce Ridley and Boyega, who adds to the humor that runs throughout the film. Harrison Ford, too, has drawn some of his best reviews in decades for his reprisal

of Han Solo. But there's no question: the scene-stealer of "The Force Awakens" is BB-8, the puppy-like droid who bleeps and bloops and rolls away with the movie. □



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Rights groups lobby Nicki Minaj to cancel concert in Angola

LYNSEY CHUTEL

Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — Rights groups are lobbying rapper Nicki Minaj to cancel her upcoming concert in Angola, a southern African country often criticized for human rights abuses and corruption.

Minaj is set to perform in the capital, Luanda, in a holiday season concert organized by Angolan mobile phone company Unitel,

according to local media reports.

"Guess who's performing in Angola Dec 19th at the Unitel Christmas Festival," Minaj tweeted, also sharing the event's poster on her Instagram account. The award-winning rapper will share the stage with local acts at the stadium concert, according to the Unitel website.

The Angolan president's daughter owns a large



Nicki Minaj speaks at a concert in Los Angeles. Rights groups are lobbying Minaj to cancel her upcoming concert in Angola, a southern African country often criticized for human rights abuses and corruption.

(Photo by Rich Fury/Invision/AP)

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STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS
HARRISON FORD | MARK HAMILL
3D VERSION
MON-THURS 5:30 | 8:30
FRI 5:30 | 8:30 | 11:30
SAT 2:25 | 5:30 | 8:30 | 11:30
SUN & HOL 2:25 | 5:30 | 8:30

3D VERSION
MON-THURS 4:45 | 7:45
FRI 4:45 | 7:45 | 10:45
SAT 1:50 | 4:45 | 7:45 | 10:45
SUN & HOL 1:50 | 4:45 | 7:45

SISTERS
AMY POEHLER | TINA FEY
WITH SPANISH SUBTITLES
MON-THURS 4:15 | 6:50 | 9:25
FRI 4:15 | 6:50 | 9:25 | 12:05
SAT 1:15 | 4:15 | 6:50 | 9:25 | 12:05
SUN & HOL 1:15 | 4:15 | 6:50 | 9:25

KEET & ROEN
MAMOUN ELYOUNOUSSI | NATHALIE MESKENS
WITH DUTCH SUBTITLES
MON-THURS 5:30 | 7:30
FRI 5:30 | 7:30
SAT 3:30 | 5:30 | 7:30
SUN & HOL 3:30 | 5:30 | 7:30

IN THE HEART OF THE SEA
CHRIS HEMSWORTH | CILLIAN MURPHY
WITH SPANISH SUBTITLES
MON-THURS 3:50 | 6:30 | 9:10
FRI-SAT 3:50 | 6:30 | 9:10 | 11:50
SUN & HOL 3:50 | 6:30 | 9:10

CREED
MICHAEL B. JORDAN | SYLVESTER STALLONE
WITH SPANISH SUBTITLES
MON-THURS 3:55 | 6:20 | 9:10
FRI-SAT 3:30 | 6:20 | 9:10 | 12:05
SUN & HOL 3:30 | 6:20 | 9:10

THE NIGHT BEFORE
JOSEPH GORDON-LEVITT | SETH ROGEN
WITH SPANISH SUBTITLES
MON-THURS 9:30
FRI-SAT 9:30 | 11:50
SUN & HOL 9:30

THE GOOD DINOSAUR
JEFFREY WRIGHT | FRANCES MCDORMAND
WITH SPANISH SUBTITLES
MON-FRI 4:30 | 6:45
SAT, SUN & HOL 2:15 | 4:30 | 6:45

THE HUNGER GAMES: MOCKINGJAY PART 2
JENNIFER LAWRENCE | JOSH HUTCHERSON
MON-THURS 9:00
FRI-SAT 9:00 | 11:55
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stake in Unitel, the country's biggest mobile phone network, according to the Human Rights Foundation. "Nicki Minaj is a global artist," the foundation's president, Thor Halvorssen, said in a statement. "There is no good reason for her to do business with the corrupt Angolan dictatorship and endorse the ruler's family company." A representative for Minaj did not immediately re-

spond to a request for comment. The group has written a letter to Minaj, urging her to cancel the performance and instead support a local rapper who was jailed along with other youth activists. "As a strong-willed independent artist, shouldn't you be advocating for the release of the imprisoned rapper Luaty Beirao (who was arrested in June and

charged with preparing a rebellion) rather than entertaining the dictator and his thieving family?" the letter read. "Nicki Minaj is following in the footsteps of Mariah Carey, callously taking money from a dictator who's been in power for nearly four decades," said Jeffrey Smith, Africa policy director for the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights group.

Cosby's attorneys move suit to federal court

JOE MANDAK

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH (AP) — Bill Cosby's attorneys have moved a defamation lawsuit by a Pittsburgh-area woman from state to federal court. The document filed early Wednesday is known as a notice of removal. It lets someone move a lawsuit to federal court if the parties live in different legal jurisdictions.

The filing indicates Cosby is a resident of Massachusetts, while his accuser, Renita Hill, lives in the Pittsburgh suburb of Baldwin. "Whether our claims are ultimately litigated in state or federal court, Renita remains resolute in her aim to see that Bill Cosby is held accountable for his actions," her attorney, George Kontos, said Wednesday. The 48-year-old woman

sued in October claiming Cosby drugged and had sex with her several times after they met on a children's educational TV show in 1983. Hill claims that went on for about four years, starting when she was 16, and that Cosby helped pay for her college, and would fly her to cities where he was performing and provide her with hotel rooms where he'd have sex with her. Hill's defamation lawsuit contends Cosby's blanket denials that he sexually abused women make her out to be an opportunistic liar. Efrem Grail, the Pittsburgh-based attorney who filed the notice of removal, said he forwarded a request for comment to Cosby's camp, which didn't immediately comment on the

motion, or Hill's allegations. On Monday, Cosby filed counterclaims in federal court in Boston against seven women who are suing him there for defamation. Like Hill, those women contend Cosby defamed them by allowing his representatives to brand them as liars. In the countersuit, Cosby claims the women made "malicious, opportunistic, and false and defamatory accusations" of sexual misconduct against him that are "nothing more than an opportunistic attempt to extract financial gain from him." Cosby's attorneys haven't filed a response to Hill's lawsuit. Hill and the Massachusetts women are among approximately 50 who have accused the comedian of rape or unwanted sexual contact.

Fox's 'Empire': Turning a hit show into a retail star

LYNN ELBER

AP Television Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Before Fox TV's "Empire" was a proven success, before any product licensing deals were signed, at least one eager retailer was getting in on the act.

Shayne Oliver, the founder of clothing label Hood by Air, says he was so inspired by the drama and its strong female characters, including Taraji P. Henson's Cookie Lyon, that he had loudspeakers boom a snippet of "Empire" dialogue at his New York runway show last February.

Now Hood by Air is an official part of the Fox company's carefully plotted and expanding merchandising "lifestyle" effort for "Empire" — in only its second season — that goes way beyond standard "Team Cookie" T-shirt fanwear and can take a TV show years of popularity to earn. The younger-skewing appeal of "Empire," the enthusiasm of up-and-coming brands like Hood by Air and the acceleration of fashion and retailing in general have combined to make the series a retailing whiz kid.

"It just feels great to be involved with something we actually like. ... something that inspires us and we're passionate about," Oliver



In this photo provided by Saks Fifth Avenue, a collection of merchandise inspired by the looks and styles of the Fox television show, "Empire," took over the windows at the flagship Saks store in New York. The Fox television series, "Empire," is at the center of an aggressive merchandising "lifestyle" campaign that is capitalizing on the show's popularity.

(Saks Fifth Avenue via AP)

said. Cookie, who may be TV's most influential fashion figure since the shoulder-pad-wearing women of "Dynasty," has earned a "Cookie's Closet" blog from Fox. It dissects her wardrobe episode-by-episode so viewers know that was a \$2,500 Gucci black leather dress she wore — and where they can find a \$98 version.

Saks Fifth Avenue, MCM and Jimmy Choo are

among the high-end retailers and licensees joining the "Empire" bandwagon that's just getting rolling, according to the 21st Century Fox division that's orchestrating the selling of the saga about family, music and power.

There are still T-shirts to be had, from Fox's own online "Empire" store and in the \$30 range. But go further afield and there's a \$200 dress, \$1,200 sport coat,

\$1,500 handbag and \$950 high heels for fans willing to splurge to get the show's glamorous looks for themselves. Other items under consideration by Fox include watches, fragrances and eyeglasses. The series became an immediate touchstone for pop culture and style after its debut last January, said Jeffrey Godsick, president of 20th Century Fox Consumer Products, allowing the

company to "approach it as a brand, as opposed to doing merchandise for a television show."

The rush to extend "Empire" from TV and into stores meant that, initially, already manufactured clothes and accessories were "curated" and given the drama's seal of approval. Some were put on prominent display in nearly a dozen windows of Saks' Manhattan flagship location and in its Beverly Hills store.

Long-established leather goods maker MCM was included in the windows and got the benefit of in-show product placement as well. In one scene featuring Henson and Bryshere Y. Gray, who plays Cookie's son Hakeem, their co-star was a rivet-studded MCM Berlin briefcase.

MCM had to increase production on the case to keep up with demand, which the company attributes in part to the "Empire" effect.

"The reach of the show is in the 18-to-49 demographic, our key target customer," said Patrick J. Valeo III, president of MCM, The Americas. "We don't want to be your parents' or grandparents' handbag. It's about new-school luxury." □

PBS series finds these 2 very unlikely Bills are related

DAVID BAUDER

AP Television Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The PBS series "Finding Your Roots" has discovered that political television's polar opposite Bills — Maher and O'Reilly — are distant cousins.

The revelation shocks the two men as it seems to tickle the show's host, Harvard University professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. The series, which had been put on hold following revelations that actor Ben Affleck sought to quash news that he had a slave-owning ancestor, begins its third season Jan. 5. The Maher-O'Reilly episode airs a week later.

The pugnacious Fox News Channel host is shown with the series-prepared book of his ancestry in front of him and is told he has a familial tie to another well-known personality.

He turns a page to see a picture of Maher, the liberal host of HBO's "Real Time." "Oh, geez," he said. "You're going to have to put him on 24-hour medical watch. This ruins his career. This destroys him."

Maher is more measured when he sees the O'Reilly picture in his book.

"It just shows you what a great place America is," he said. "Because we're about as opposite as you can possibly get."

The family ties go back — way back — and were discovered through DNA testing as opposed to a paper trail of a family tree.

Through testing of their Y chromosomes, which are passed through male family lines, both men share a common male ancestor from Kingdom of Breifne in Ireland, which was in place from the 13th through the 17th centuries, said CeCe Moore, the show's DNA consultant.

Separate autosomal DNA testing, which tracks descendants of both sexes, also indicates the men share an ancestor. This testing measures ties that date back about 500 years; the

two tests could have spotted the same common ancestor found through the Y chromosome or perhaps they had more than one, she said.

"We're all connected if you go back far enough," Moore said. "These two are a little bit more recent than most of us."

Once the tie was discovered, "putting them in the same show became irresistible," Gates said. Journalist Soledad O'Brien, who discovered a distant connection to late-night talk show host Stephen Colbert, is also featured on the Jan. 12 episode.

The paper trail for both men uncovered interest-

ing descendants. A Maher ancestor was a prominent New York union boss while the first O'Reilly to come to the U.S. escaped the Irish potato famine at age 16 to come to New York and open a saloon.

Maya Rudolph, Shonda Rhimes, Jimmy Kimmel, Sen. John McCain, Dustin Hoffman and Sean "Puffy" Combs are among the personalities whose backgrounds are traced in the upcoming "Finding Your Roots" season. The Affleck revelations, which forced a more rigorous and independent system on producers, did not scare away any potential subjects, Gates said. □

Record heat sets the tone for year's searing headlines

ADAM GELLER
AP National Writer

When a devastating heat wave hit India this year, it killed more than 2,500 people and melted the pavement of New Delhi's streets. In California, where an ordinary year sees mountain snow pile 6-feet (1.83-meters) deep or more — supplying much drinking water — surveyors had nothing to measure in some spots but bare grass.

By the time 2015 is over, it is certain to go down as the warmest year on record. But if the heat was unsettling, it also set the tone for many of the headlines that defined the year, even when they ranged far beyond matters of extreme weather or changing climate.

From searing tragedies to blistering campaign rhetoric to boiling crises, the top news of 2015 made for one of the hottest years in recent memory, literally and figuratively.

In a year that visited carnage upon worshippers who opened their church to a stranger in Charleston, South Carolina, and fans who gathered on a Friday night for a rock concert in the center of Paris, the news left the public with little refuge. Headlines spotlighting bloody clashes for control of Syria and the angry debate over whether to take in those fleeing the violence, radiated heat, but often not much light.

Instead, many of the year's biggest news stories fueled a narrative of intensifying conflict.

It began just days into the new year, when two brothers who called themselves members of al-Qaida forced their way in to the offices of Paris humor magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and a nearby Jewish market, gunning down 17.

"Our great and beautiful France will never break, will never yield, will never bend," President Francois Hollande told those gathered days later to honor two police officers killed in the assault. But by year's end, France was hardly alone in its vulnerability.

In the U.S., the tensions of the old year bled into the new one. In Baltimore, the April death of Freddie Gray, a black man tossed in the back of a van by police officers, set off rioting whose destruction echoed that in Ferguson, Missouri, the previous year. In North Charleston, South Caro-

lina, Tulsa and Chicago, police shootings of black men prompted resignations and indictments. A protest at the University of Missouri over racial discrimination forced the departure of the school's president.

In June, a young man invited into a Bible study at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, opened fire, killing nine. The shooter was white. All the victims, including the congregation's pastor, were black, killed in an attack police said was motivated by racial hatred.



In this August 2015 file photo, CalFire firefighter Bo Santiago lights a backfire as the Rocky fire burns near Clearlake, Calif. A new study by the Public Policy Institute of California says dying wildlife, bigger wildfires and drying-up farm towns will be the biggest crises if California's four-year drought continues. (AP Photo/Josh Edelson)

In October, a 26-year-old student at a community college outside Roseburg, Oregon, shot and killed a professor and eight fellow students during their writing and English classes.

In November, three people were gunned down at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs. The alleged gunman, apprehended after a five-hour standoff, told authorities: "No more baby parts." But as politicians and advocates clashed over abortion, guns, race and religious extremism, there was little, if any, movement to-

ward resolution.

The heat of the campaign season was paralleled by the weather, itself. Global temperatures hit records in eight of the year's first 10 months, with scientists pointing to a potent El Nino pattern combined with accelerating human-caused climate change.

representative, said in an emotional speech delivered on the chamber's floor. "I have heard enough about heritage."

The flag came down, at least in South Carolina. But the heat did not let up.

In July, a Kuwait-born engineer shot and killed four Marines and a sailor at a

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followed through in a December conference outside Paris, culminating years of negotiation with a first-of-its-kind pact to fight climate change by reducing greenhouse gas pollution.

That step toward resolution, though, was an anomaly in a climate of rising tension.

Month after month, migrants surged into Europe from the roiling Middle East, with scores drowning in the Mediterranean, packing refugee camps as countries struggled to respond.

In Tunisia, terrorists killed 22, mostly European tourists, at a museum in March and another 39 tourists at a beach resort in June.

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The threat, though, would not stay contained to the Middle East. On a Friday night six weeks before Christmas, eight Islamic State terrorists, wielding rifles and suicide belts, killed 130 people in closely coordinated assaults around Paris.

"This attack is the first of the storm and a warning to those who wish to learn," the group said in a communique distributed via social media. The attack spurred a cross-border manhunt. But it simultaneously refocused attention on the civil war that has enveloped Syria since 2011, killing more than 250,000 and uprooting millions, creating a vacuum filled by Islamic extremists and, increasingly, drawing governments from far beyond the region into a vortex of conflicting agendas.

Just three weeks after Paris, Syed Farook, and his wife, Tashfeen Malik, masked and clad in tactical vests, opened fire on his co-workers in San Bernardino, California as they gathered for a holiday meeting, killing 14 and wounding 21. □

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